

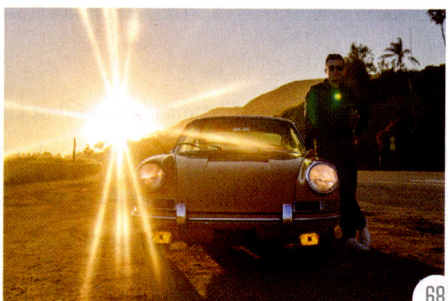
Porsche Panorama Issue 801 September 2024

Anything But Easy Story and Photos by Sean Cridland

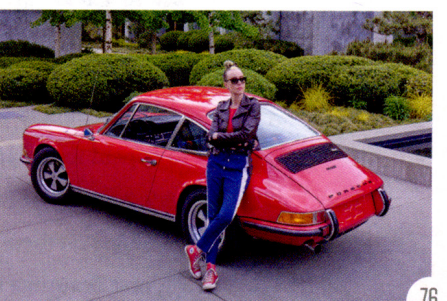




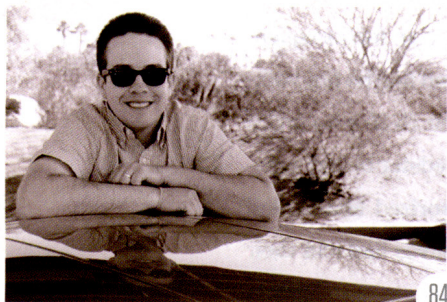
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COVER **Speedster**
PHOTO BY RANDY WELLS

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ANYTHING BUT EASY



DESPITE BRAKE ISSUES, DAVID DONOHUE WINS HIS FOURTH TIME ATTACK AT PIKES PEAK.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SEAN CRIDLAND



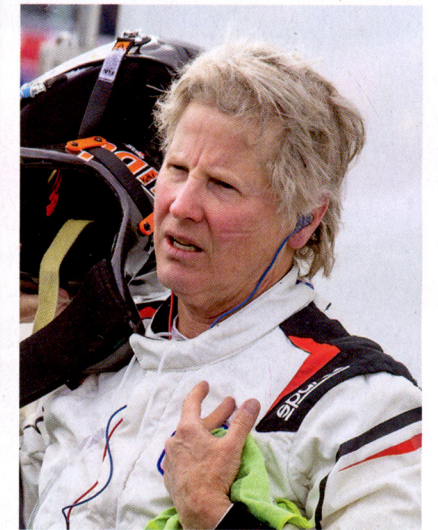
WINNING ANY EVENT multiple times can be a razor-sharp, double-edged sword. In addition to inflating the expectations of fans, media, and the teams themselves, victory often makes a difficult task look easy. Since 1960, when Bob Donner, Jr., took Porsche's first Pikes Peak class victory in an RS-60, the marque has recorded two overall wins, four overall runner-up positions, and an astonishing 36 class wins. Some years, entire class podiums have been made up of Porsche drivers. But for anyone thinking that rolling a Porsche out of a transporter on race day guarantees a win, guess again. As events proved during the 102nd running of the Pikes

Peak International Hill Climb, it's not that easy.

This past June 23 turned out to be "one of those days" when very little went right for some of Porsche's drivers. Though David Donohue won his fourth Time Attack class victory, the look on his face at the top of America's Mountain was well short of a proud grin. For the entire month leading up to the race, the Mobil 1/Porsche of Colorado Springs/BBi Porsche special had been fighting braking issues—so much so that the day before the race Donohue and crew were at Pueblo Motorsports Park testing their latest theory of a fix. Though as Romain Dumas told Donohue in jest, "It's uphill, you



Kathryn Mead was one of the few Porsche runners to have a trouble-free June, improving her personal best by 16 seconds and taking a well-deserved second place in Time Attack.



"I maintained focus on a day that was difficult for so many other teams, hit all my performance marks, and was blessed by the mountain." —Kathryn Mead

don't need brakes!" the fact is that with virtually every one of the 156 corners offering only trees, rocks, and sky as run-off areas, brakes are a burden necessary for fast times and driver safety.

Though his time of 9:49.429 gave him a healthy win over class runner-up (and Porsche-driving) Kathryn Mead by more than 47 seconds, it was also about 30 seconds slower than his personal best of the year before. "We thought we had the problem solved, but by the time I made it to the straight at Picnic, where we're going close to 120 miles per hour, something wasn't right," Donohue said. "By the time I made it to Ski Area, it felt as if the bias had shifted toward the rear." By the time he made it to the fastest part of the course at Bottomless Pit—so named for the 3,000-foot cliff on the left side of the road—he wasn't sure he had any front brakes at all. The fact that he set a winning time said heaps about his grit as a driver and his experience on the hill, knowing where he could push and where he could coast. "I'm glad I could give the win to my sponsors and team, but I'm hoping we can work this out this summer," Donohue said. "I think there's a lot more performance in this car."

Mead, driving a Cayman GT4 RS Clubsport, was one of a very few in the Porsche contingent extremely happy with her result. Her time of 10:37.010 was 16 seconds

faster than her previous personal best, a feat she attributes to a fluke in testing groups. "During one of our sessions, we got ten runs on the very fast and bumpy upper section of the course, a section that has always been very intimidating," she said. "We had the opportunity to figure the suspension settings for those really bad bumps near Boulder Park."

It was that difference, she said, that let her blast through those sections without lifting. Though most of the Cayman drivers race against each other in the GT4 class, some of the performance upgrades on Mead's car pushed her into the Time Attack class, where some cars carry 200-300 more horsepower. "I shouldn't have finished ahead of someone like (IndyCar and sports car driver) Katherine Legge, but on Pikes Peak experience counts for a lot," Mead said. "I maintained focus on a day that was difficult for so many other teams, hit all my performance marks, and was blessed by the mountain. I was over the moon to be on the podium with David."

A COUPLE OF notable Porsche racers who were not blessed were prerace favorites Loni Unser and her coach, eight-time winner Jeff Zwart. Along with Donohue, both were also part of the Mobil 1/BBi effort. Veteran fans still regard Pikes Peak as Unser Mountain. It's



a moniker well-earned. Besides her great-uncle Bobby's record ten overall wins, great-great-uncle Louis won it nine times, cousin Robby four times, and Uncle Al and cousin "Little Al" each have overall wins to their credit. Though she has raced at Pikes Peak the last couple of years, 2024 was the first year 26-year-old Loni was entered in Lisa Taylor's Flying L Racing Porsche GT3 Turbo, which once held the record as the fastest Porsche on the mountain. In 2019, Frenchman Raphael Astier drove it to a time of 9:23.721, more than two minutes faster than Loni's previous 2023 best of 11:34.709. Unser is a very capable racer who has been prudently working her way up through several racing series under the management and tutelage of her father, Johnny, but many wondered how she would do in a car with twice the horsepower of her previous rides.

Unser is destined to go as high up the racing ladder as she would like to climb, and not just on her name. From her first Pikes Peak appearance in 2022 when she raced a Cayman, she impressed racers, officials, media, and fans with her concentration, and ability to listen and learn. But early season testing in the GT3 Turbo showed her to be a minute or more behind Donohue in each section. Onlookers already were murmuring doubts—until she qualified just a few seconds off Donohue's pace. Some of it was her well-cultivated talent, and some of

it came from her coaching sessions with Zwart.

"I had already coached Loni when she raced in the Cayman two years ago, and she was an exemplary student," Zwart said. "When I heard that she would be in the Flying L Racing GT3 Turbo, I made it a point to contact her and start the process. I also drove the car to evaluate its performance potential.

"I've been coaching for a while and have a very precise program. Every run, I monitor my students' performance figures carefully, with the expectation that each of them will eventually build up to their potential bests without overstepping their experience levels from im-



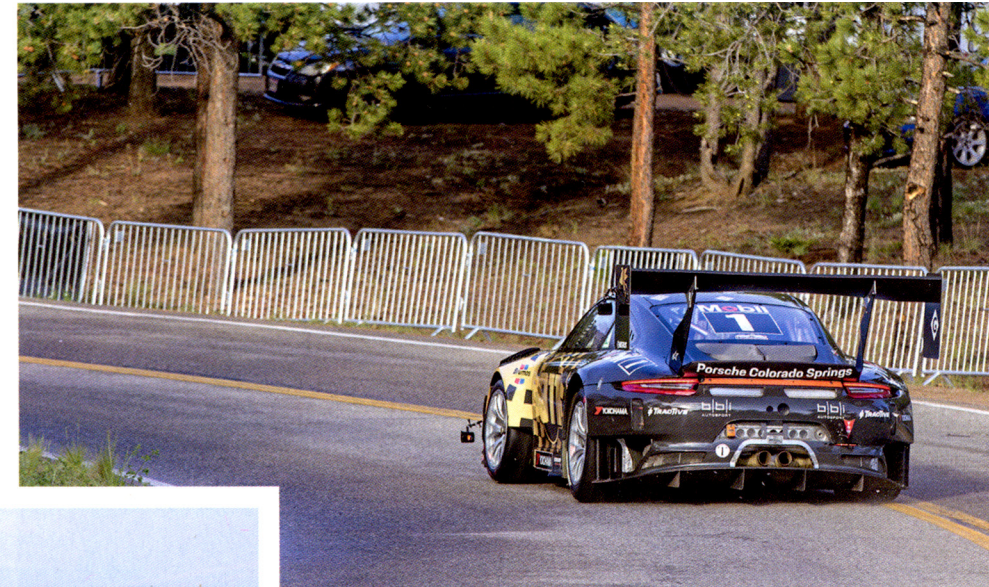
Asked if she felt pressure from representing the Unser name, Loni's answer was an unqualified "Yes!" She came into this year's race with a car nearly three times more powerful than her previous entries. With guidance from coach Jeff Zwart (speaking to Unser), she excelled in testing, though was sidelined by a mechanical failure halfway up the mountain on race day.



patience. I went up and down the mountain many times with Loni in my personal car. Not only was she an attentive listener, but her questions were all the right ones. She may have looked slow in early testing, but she was following my guidelines to the letter. I wasn't at all surprised that she was fast when it mattered."

Zwart projected her to have a top-five time on race day, and her split times showed her to be on pace for a class podium and maybe a top-five overall finish. Then

993 chassis, it's powered by an air-cooled turbocharged engine paired with 992 transmission and suspension. On paper it promised great performance and reminded Zwart of the car he won with back in the late 1990s. Unfortunately, its development lagged, and it didn't make it to the first two weekends of testing when most of the top teams iron out their teething issues. It made its first appearance on race-week Monday at tech inspection, resplendent in all-white. But it blew its engine that af-



Despite suffering chronic braking problems all month long, hill-climb veteran David Donohue drove to his fourth Time Attack victory. Nuno Caetano (left) drove a solid race to win the non-turbo GT4 class in his 2023 718 GT4 RS Clubsport. Jeff Zwart's month in the Porsche 993 Evo was filled with suspense, drama, and disappointment. With all eyes upon him, he rolled to the start hoping for a better ending, but was frustrated when a mechanical issue took him off course only yards past the starting line.

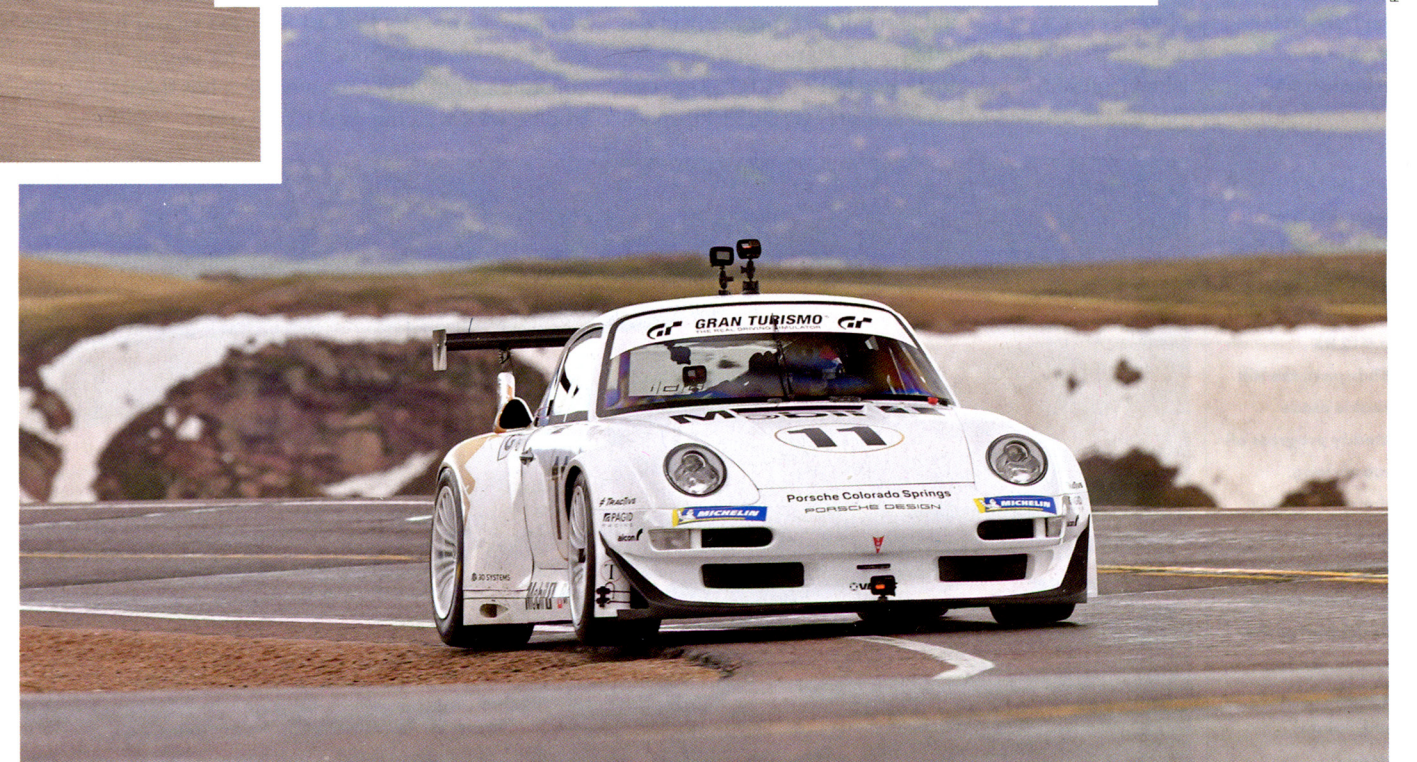


she lost a turbo going up through the steep and dangerous esses called "The Ws." By the time she got to Devils Playground, her day was done. Her fast qualification time allowed her to start early in the day, so her DNF meant she spent seven hours posing with fans and putting children in the car for photos. No matter. "I told her that with everything she's learned, she'll leave Pikes Peak at a different level," Zwart said. Sure enough, her very next weekend at Watkins Glen she was racing at the front and took a podium in the very competitive Porsche Challenge race. Zwart also had another coaching client do very well on race day. Mobil 1-sponsored Toyota Supra driver Laura Hayes took the GT4-Turbo class win and set a women's record of 10:20.487.

REWARDING AS IT was to see his students do well, Zwart's race month was anything but satisfying. His 2024 entry was a BBi-built Open-class 993 Evo. Based on a

ternoon during shakedown at nearby Pikes Peak International Raceway. With no spare available until late in the week, Zwart missed his qualifying session and had to start last. To make matters worse, the mountain was blanketed with fog on his only practice day, resulting in only one run on one part of the mountain. Putting a brave face on the situation, he joked the morning of the race that, "I've never had to start alphabetically before."

His race day might have been interesting, except that it wasn't. Higher-than-average temperatures caused many competitors to suffer mechanical issues translating to seemingly endless red flags and race stoppages. Every other year of his 28 Pikes Peak races had Zwart laughing and telling stories with his fellow drivers at the top of the mountain after a top-tier performance. In 2024, he didn't run until four in the afternoon, and when he did, didn't make it past the second turn of the course. "Something happened that I've never had happen in a



RUPERT BERRINGTON



Romain Dumas returned with an electric Ford F-150 truck with outsized power and aerodynamics. Though he experienced a power glitch near the bottom that brought him to a dead stop for nearly half a minute, he still broke the nine-minute barrier and took his fifth King of the Mountain title.

Jim Hall II's experience was emblematic of this year's Porsche contingent. Driving a GT2 RS Clubsport, the Hill rookie made steady progress all month long, though his debut ended with an off-course excursion on the lower part of the course. He was fine and the car had only minor damage.

Porsche of any kind or era," Zwart said. "When I got on the throttle under the start banner, something must have broken. The rear took off and before I knew it, I was off course." Ever the optimist, he says he loves the concept and hopes that he gets a chance to race it next year when it's fully developed.

In other notable Porsche action, Nuno Caetano of Portugal won the non-turbo GT4 class in a Cayman GT4 RS Clubsport with a time of 10:23.034. Romanian Jerome France placed third in Time Attack in a 2011 GT3 RS with a time of 10:44.501. Andy Kingsley's heavily modified 2002 GT2-Pikes Peak special took eighth in the Unlimited class with a time of 10:38.061.

Longtime Viper driver Raymund Guerrero finally saw the light and took sixth in Time Attack in a 2019 GT2 RS Clubsport. Cayman drivers Robb Holland and Christopher Becker were second and third, respectively in the non-turbo GT4 Class, and Phillipe Marion of France finished eighth in Time Attack in a 2017 991 GT3 Cup car. Jim Hall II also was entered in a 2019 GT2 RS Clubsport,

but had an off-course excursion that took him out of the race, though thankfully without injury or much damage.

Last, but far from least, former Porsche factory driver, Pikes Peak record holder, and two-time Le Mans winner Romain Dumas won his fifth King of the Mountain trophy in the electric Ford F-150 Lightning Super Truck. Very large and with the aerodynamics of a brick, the thing had a wing almost seven feet high and a ground-effects tunnel large enough to house a small family. He set blisteringly fast times in test sessions leading up to the race. Only an off-course excursion or a technical glitch could have kept him from winning. But guess what? About ten corners out from the start, his Ford came to a dead stop with no power. In a rare bout of patience, Dumas calmly did the race-car equivalent of "Alt-Ctrl-Del," the Ford restarted, and he blitzed his way to the top. His time of 8:53.553 would have been impressive even without the stop for coffee. When one considers what might have been ... but then, that's the trouble with winning, isn't it? 🍷

