

Double Fantasy

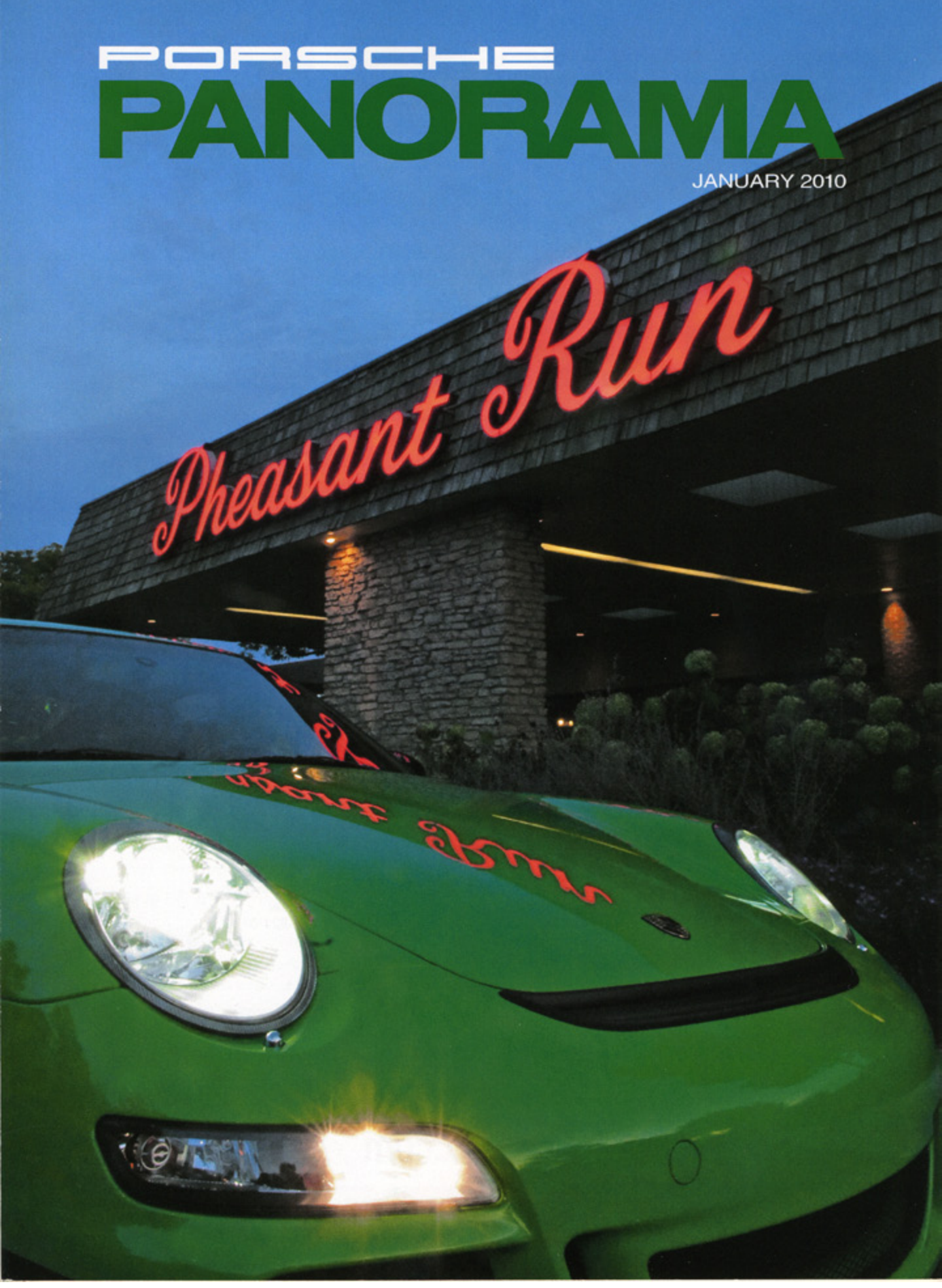
by Sean Cridland

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An invitation to the party at St. Charles, Illinois, this summer. Bring your car and join the crowd at Pheasant Run Resort. Photo by Neil MacDonald © 2009.

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JANUARY, 2010/1

Any kind of trip that's Porsche themed is bound to be a good one. I was lucky enough last September to have one that involved two very different kinds of experiences, one which led me back to a memorable part of my past and one which opened entirely new ground.

It was a long time ago in a place far, far away, but it was something that kept popping up in my dreams again and again. At the Bonneville Salt Flats they call it "salt fever" or "sodium poisoning." It's an illness for which there is no known cure. It's the urge to go as fast as you possibly can, whether you're driving a jet-powered streamliner or a 50cc motorcycle. Or, as it is in my case, a modified 1990 964 C4.

I had my first taste of the salt back in 1985 when I was training for speed skiing, a sport which involves skiing over 130 mph and for which there are precious few training opportunities. Some of the racers in Europe started training by putting their skis in a ski rack of a fast car and getting on top while having a trusted friend drive them on the *autostrada* down the valley from Cervina, Italy. Then Finnish ski racer Kalevi Hakkinen decided he could get more sponsorship if he set a record. He did 118 mph on top of a Saab rally car. It escalated for a few years till British racers Graham and Stuart Wilkie went 125 mph on top of a Ford BTCC car. All the European record attempts were limited by straight running space and car-types.

Two experiences—one which led me back to a memorable part of my past and one which opened entirely new ground.

DOUBLE FANTASY

BY SEAN CRIDLAND



Cridland sets up to run in the Utah Salt Flats Racing Association's entry-level class, the 130 Club. It's an opportunity for first-timers to see how fast their car will go at the end of a standing start mile. Those who successfully manage two runs between 130 and 139.999 mph are inducted into the 130 Club.



On track at Miller Motorsports Park for Inter-mountain Region's driver education weekend. Cridland says that he learned more about driving in three hours than he had in three years.



Poster documents Cridland's record in 1985. He set the world record for a speed-skier training on the top of a car by going through the mile trap at 162 mph on top of Rick Vesco's famous 444 streamliner.

It occurred to me that the Bonneville Salt Flats had unlimited room and cars that could easily go over 300mph.

It took three calls for me to reach Rick Vesco, a member of the famous Bonneville racing Vescos. He suggested that I come by to check out his car and to talk about how it could be done. In 15 minutes it was decided and four short months later I set the world record for a speed-skier training on the top of a car by going through the mile trap at 162 mph on top of the famous 444 streamliner. That would be enough of a story for most people and it almost seemed like enough for me. Almost. I told Rick at the time that I would eventually like to come and drive...inside the car.

The photos that depicted that event found their

way into all kind of magazines, posters and videos. Even when I moved on to other ventures, the photos and stories followed me. How could they not? It was daring and the photos were spectacular. But, really, it was just a few days of my life which were following me around for years and years. Years in which I went on to do a lot of very different kinds of things such as working toward several degrees, working in academia, and traveling in Asia while pursuing studies in Tibetan culture and philosophy.

As they say, what goes around, comes around. In 2003 I bought my first Porsche, a 1990 Carrera 4. I got it because it would be "practical" on the snow and ice in Colorado, where I lived. But then it all went haywire: I attended an autocross. Many have told and heard the

same story. The car got lower, and lighter, and more powerful. Eventually the interior came out and the roll-cage went in. The car became 700 pounds lighter through a number of modifications. Local bodyman Kirk Maurer helped to keep it pretty and mechanic Russ Kelso helped to make it powerful and the car eventually became known locally as "the Beast."

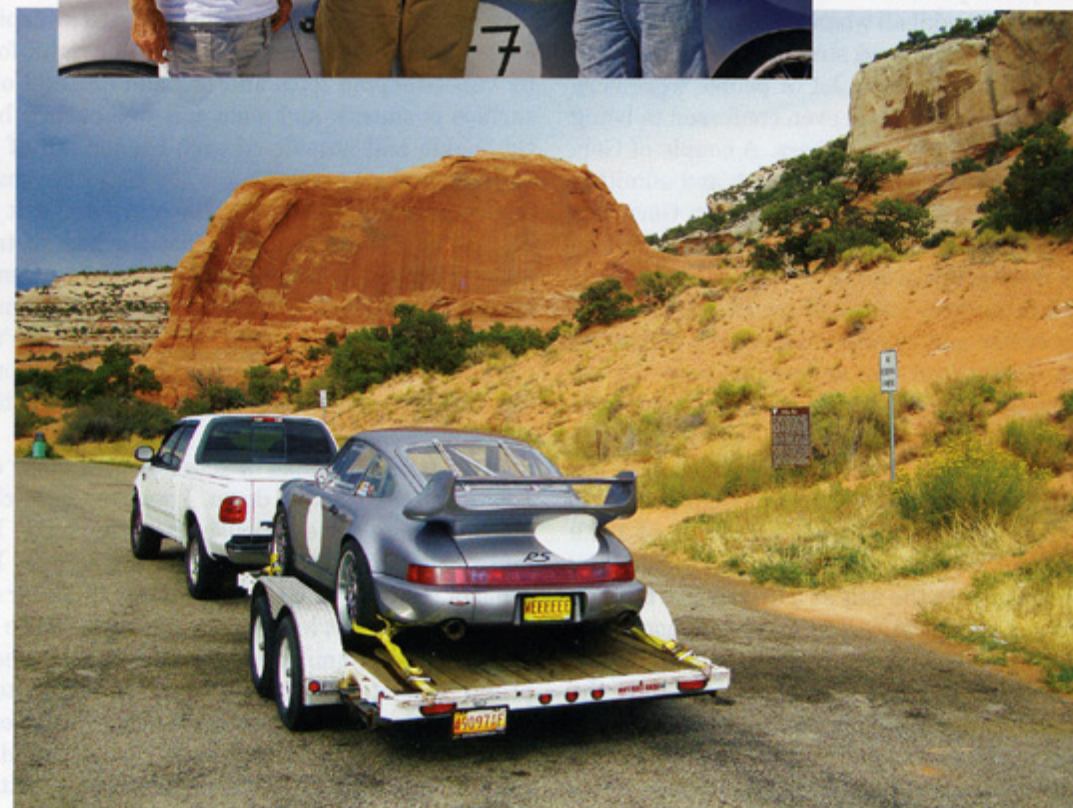
In the fall of 2004, 19 years after my record at Bonneville, the first pangs of salt fever started to return. After Don Vesco's passing, Rick took a couple of years off from the salt and retired to Southern Utah. I had gone through a career change and was feeling a little bit lost. For different reasons, we met out at Bonneville just to walk around, visit with the

competitors, and look at the machines. While we were out there a production company was filming at the far end of the salt. We heard something about a biopic about an old New Zealander.

A year later, my significant other, Sandra, who is full Native American, suggested we go see a movie playing at the Santa Fe Film Festival: The World's Fastest Indian. We figured it to be about the legendary runner Billy Mills, who had set a world record in the 10K at the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo. So did the entire theater filled with Native Americans of many different tribes. We were wrong. It was the story of legendary Kiwi Bert Munro, who had a lifelong ambition to race his 1920 Indian Motorcycle at Bonneville. While everyone



Cridland with Dave Hooker (left) and Rick Vesco (right). Hooker helped fund Cridland's record-setting effort in the 1980s, while Vesco owns and drove the streamliner Cridland rode in 1985. Last summer Vesco's streamliner went 348 mph with a small block Chevy engine.



The scenic route back—over the pass from the Salt Lake Valley, through the beautiful canyon areas around Moab, through Southwestern Colorado with its views of Mesa Verde and down through New Mexico to home in the Jemez Mountains.

giggled with dismay at being fooled by the title, I found myself with tears of joy running down my cheek when I realized it was the story of someone fulfilling their dream at Bonneville.

I continued autocrossing and doing track days, but all the while I had in the back of my mind going back to Bonneville. While I would love to have returned in a streamliner of Vesco quality, I had to be realistic. I have the car that I have and I love it. Finally, events conspired to bring me back. I was fortunate enough to be asked to be the PCA Zone 9 Rep. For those of you who don't know, Zone 9 runs through seven regions from the Big Bend of the Rio Grande to the... Bonneville Salt Flats. That means that at least once a year I have to visit the Intermountain Region (which comprises all of Utah). This year, the schedule showed that the Intermountain Region Club Race and DE was the weekend immediately following the Utah Salt Flats Racing Association World of Speed Event. That sealed the deal.

USFRA is the only sanctioning body on the salt to offer an entry-level class called the 130 Club. It's an opportunity for first-timers to see how fast their cars will go at the end of a standing start mile. Those who successfully manage two runs between 130 and 139.999 mph are inducted into the 130 Club. Most street cars qualify without any modifications. It's a great way to get out on the salt and learn about the culture and be present as a participant, rather than just a spectator.

I felt a bit like an oddball when I arrived amongst all the hotrods, motorcycles and streamliners in the tech-line. But soon I found that a lot of people were very curious about the car. Several even confessed to being Porsche owners and PCA members. A couple of German guys introduced themselves to me and admitted to being big 964 fans, racing them back in Germany. There were at least six Porsche cars competing at various levels during the event, including a home-made electric 911 in its first stages of development. Even GT Racing owner and Porsche lightweight bodywork guru Hank Godfredson was on hand as crew for the Rennhausen team from Grand Junction, who were there running a vintage Super Vee in the 130 Club.

To make a long story short, the Beast (with all the vents and ducts taped off and tires at high pressure) easily took me into the 130 Club with runs of 134.9 and 132.7. I met a lot of great people and fulfilled my dream of returning to the salt as a driver. I've already got a few easy modifications in mind to smooth out the aero-shape of the car so I can return to do the 150 Club, which allows two miles of run-up before the speed trap. Eventually, I'd like to license for the long course and maybe even someday return with a high-powered, streamlined 911 and break 300 mph.

But, if I stopped here that would only be half of the story. After leaving the salt IMR president Otto Silva and his family graciously hosted me so that I could

stay on the next week for the Club Race and DE on the full 4.5 mile course at Miller Motorsport Park, one of the country's premier race facilities. Since I live in New Mexico where both of the two road courses are under two miles, I began to wonder what it might be like to drive such a large course with so many corners. I had told many of my friends that I would probably get lost after two miles and turn back. Of course now days, if you want to find out about any course you can go on YouTube and find many videos of on-course lapping. So, I spent the week looking at the course map that Otto provided me and watching the videos. Everyone knows that a little YouTube video is a poor substitute for actually driving a course, but at least now you can vaguely see what it might look like as you gaze at your track-map.

Poor substitute and vague are understated terms, to say the least, for one's first encounter with Miller Motorsport Park. Driving in you feel what Dorothy must have felt when she first saw Oz. The facilities would be a fitting home for a future USGP F1 race. Pit-lane garages, a fully paved paddock area that would be suitable for a national-level autocross championship, other garages for competitors, multiple restaurants, and a swank, sophisticated club house are just some of the amenities you encounter before you even venture onto the track.

That's a whole other world. The phrase "big fish in a small pond" comes to mind quickly when entering turn one from pit lane at Miller. A hard sweeping left leads into an equally large, but gentler right, followed by two sweeping lefts and on...and on...and on. The surface is smooth and wide and well-curbed both on the inside and outside of each corner. All of the 23 corners on the 4.5-mile course are distinct in character and require full attention to the entry and exit points. Many competitors complain that the lack of trees or other geographic fixtures make it hard to remember each corner, though I didn't find that a problem. More it's just so large and long. Most tracks don't come close to approaching the length and there are precious few facilities anywhere in the world where lap times of 3:20+ are possible.

After riding a couple of sessions with other drivers I figured that I had it down. I was ready to climb in my car and do some seriously fast laps. NOT! I found myself floundering around the long course. I know some of the faster cars and drivers with Miller experience passed me at least once and maybe twice in that session. Fully humiliated, I wouldn't have been surprised if a skateboarder and a Yugo passed me too. But talking with some of those same drivers later on, they all reassured me that their first times around Miller were similar. Whew! Sure enough it did get better.

While day one was spent finding the corners, day two was probably the best day of learning I've ever had in a car. I can honestly say that I learned more



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about driving in three hours than I have in three years. All the topics that I've read about in my Ross Bentley books were no longer theory. Each session was 25 miles long and afforded enough time to really learn about each feature of the course. Being on track with more experienced drivers in faster cars meant that I had ample opportunity to learn from watching their line. It also meant learning how to use my mirrors effectively. That's a skill that all drivers need to learn even if they don't want to admit it.

Intermountain Region (admittedly spoiled by having such a beautiful facility in their backyard) did a fantastic job during the weekend with both their Club Race and with their DE sessions. As someone who has never been around PCA Club Racing, it was great to see and experience all the camaraderie amongst the racers. It was great to see the lengths racers would go through to help each other when their cars would break. Parts were lent or given, but so was time. I heard of at least two all-night sessions of competitors helping other racers to fix or rebuild portions of engines or suspension. The PCA motto "It's not just the cars, it's the people" was never more evident or true. The racing was good too! In the end, it was great to meet so many Intermountain Region members and a lot of other people who came from all over the west

to race. I also saw several people I'd met at other events I'd attended during the year, including this year's Parade Chairs, Walt and Kathy Fricke, who were on hand to race and help out during the weekend.

Eventually it was time to head back to New Mexico, towing my little car over the pass from the Salt Lake Valley, through the beautiful canyon areas around Moab, through Southwestern Colorado with its views of Mesa Verde and down through New Mexico to our little house in the Jemez Mountains. As I did, I couldn't help but reflect on the great and varied experiences I'd had in the two weeks since I set off. I'd made new friends and memories on the Bonneville Salt Flats and the 911 had done reasonably well in its first foray onto the salt. I'd also had a chance to drive on one of North America's best driving courses and racing facilities. And, perhaps most importantly, I'd made a lot of new Porsche friends from around the Western United States and around the world. Two entirely different kinds of driving experiences contributed to one great Porsche-themed trip. ☺