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NEW ERA

AN ELECTRIC CAR WINS OVERALL AT PIKES PEAK, USHERING IN
A NEW AGE ON THE HILL—BUT THE 911 ISN'T DONE YET.

STORY BY SEAN CRIDLAND PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR AND LINHBERGH NGUYEN





It's funny what a year can do in the racing world.

At the conclusion of the 2014 Pikes Peak International Hill Climb, organizers were already talking about 2016 and the centennial race, skipping over 2015 in press releases and conversation. ♦ Porsche fans didn't have much to look forward to, either. In 2014, Jeff Zwart lost the Time Attack 1 class to Vincent Beltoise by only 1.2 seconds due to a faulty fuel pump, and he was rumored to be either retiring or shifting to a Macan for 2015. Time Attack 2 winner Fred Veitch was retiring, and Vintage class driver Chris Lennon had conceded that his 1973 911 RSR coupe had delivered all it could—coming second yet again to Ralf Christensson's Shelby. ♦ Perhaps the organizers were right to concentrate less on the 2015 event than on 2016. Luckily, racers don't have that kind of patience.

THE FIRST HINT that 2015 would be a special year came on a January visit to Porsche of Colorado Springs, when service manager and Pikes Peak-winning crew chief Dave Petitti motioned out back and pointed to a low-mileage 2014 911 Turbo S with a conspicuous "sold" tag.

"Don't tell anyone—that's going to be Donner's car," said Petitti. If you don't know what that means, consider that David Donner's grandfather, Bob Donner, helped resurrect the race up Pikes Peak after the dormant World War II years. David's father, Bob Donner Jr., raced Pikes Peak in Porsche RSKs and RS60s in the late 1950s and 1960s, winning the race three years in a row from 1960 to 1962. David's older brother, Bobby III, won overall in 1989. As for David? He won overall in 1991, 2002, and 2005 in a Donner-Dykstra open-wheel special. In 2012, he drove a Palatov special to an Unlimited class win. Donner is one of a small group of people who have won when the road up Pikes Peak was unpaved, partially paved, and fully paved.

In 2013, Donner returned to his family's Porsche roots and entered his own 911 GT3 Cup in the still unrefined Time Attack class, which grouped street-stock vehicles with all-out prototype racers that vaguely resembled street cars. Admittedly, Donner's GT3 Cup was no street car,

but it wasn't a purpose-built "special" as was the Millen Racing Hyundai Genesis that Paul Dallenbach drove that year. Nor was it on par with Jeff Zwart's turbocharged 997 GT3 Cup/GT2 RS "hybrid," which had 300 more horses.

No matter. Donner drove like a man possessed that year, qualifying ahead of Dallenbach and Zwart and finishing a close second to the Hyundai after Zwart got mired in weather.

Donner sat out Pikes Peak in 2014, instead racing in the Pirelli Cup. In the meantime, the PPIHC competition committee realigned the rules so that all-out racers such as the Hyundai and Zwart's turbo GT3 Cup would race against similar cars in Time Attack 1, while street-based cars with light modifications to engine software and brakes would race in Time Attack 2.

Fred Veitch won TA2 in 2014 in a lightly modified 2001 996 Turbo. With Veitch retiring, Petitti thought someone with Donner's experience and talent driving a Porsche 991 Turbo S with nearly 600 hp, improved handling, launch control, and rear-wheel steering could break into the vaunted nine-minute zone—in a street-legal car.

Gradually and quietly, the Donner effort came together. The team got many of Veitch's sponsors, and a nice little story was developing. But

from a writer's perspective, that's all it was, a nice little story: Porsche enters, Porsche wins. Nice for Porsche, but not much drama.

ALL THAT CHANGED IN MARCH. Upstart Pikes Peak Racing—new to the Colorado Springs area—announced it was preparing a 2009 Nissan GT-R for the Time Attack 2 class, to be driven by champion road racer Randy Pobst. Leading the new team was former Porsche of Colorado Springs mechanic Travis Smith, who had worked on Veitch's car in 2014 and Donner's in 2013. The buzz began.

Many insisted that Donner—with all his experience on the mountain and with a 991 Turbo S with four-wheel steering—would be a shoo-in on Pikes Peak. Others were talking about YouTube videos of the Nissan

Opposite: David Donner's 2014 911 Turbo S speeds through the fast upper section. Below: Friendly rivals Randy Pobst and David Donner traded fast times throughout the month leading to the race.





Above: Other than safety equipment, Donner's 991 Turbo was essentially street stock. **Below:** Chris Lennon has won the Pikes Peak Vintage class in two of the past four years. **Right:** Lennon's 911 parked next to Pobst's GT-R.



GT-R burning up the Nürburgring. Pobst's dozens of professional victories in a variety of classes and cars came up. Even Donner admitted he had read several articles written about Pobst and knew of his talent. Oh, and it seemed that Pikes Peak Racing was working around the clock—testing, testing, and more

testing at local tracks, with Pobst offering constant feedback.

Petitti and Donner were unflappable. In May, Petitti slowly began preparing the 991, removing what interior bits were legal to remove. The car kept its heater, air-conditioning, sound system, and parking cameras. Petitti ran the car in local PCA

track days. Eventually, the roll cage went in and testing began in earnest, although some wondered if they had started too late. More gossip ensued.

While Donner is undeniably good on the mountain and Porsche is, well, Porsche, would the 991 be up to the task? And what about Pobst? Sure, he's good—but Donner can drive Pikes Peak blindfolded.

ON-MOUNTAIN TESTING BEGAN in the pre-dawn hours in mid-June. The two cars would run on the same surface for the first time. Smith, Petitti's former employee, would be parked next to the Porsche team in the pit area, and Donner would meet his rival Pobst.

It was an interesting pairing, to say the least. Aside from their racing backgrounds, the two drivers present an interesting case study. Both are outgoing, gregarious, and modest, articulate and with a quick—but

gentle—sense of humor. As nice as they seem, both are intensely competitive and supremely confident. And they seem to like each other. The two were often seen in animated conversation and continued their banter all through official testing the week before the race. Perhaps even more interesting, the two traded fastest times almost every run up the mountain, rarely separated by more than a second or two on any given section. A *great* race was brewing in Time Attack 2.

JEFF ZWART TOOK HIS TIME deciding what he would do in 2015. Always one to hold his cards close, he eventually decided to enter his BBF-prepared turbo GT3 Cup one more time in Time Attack 1. With two years of development, it had to come right this time, didn't it?

If you've never seen this car in action, it is one to behold. Zwart de-

scribes it as the best car he's driven, ever. It showed when he set the fastest times in several early test sessions, running faster than Paul Dalenbach's 1,000-hp open-wheel car.

On the other side of town, Chris Lennon and his volunteer crew had been building a little monster of a car to replace the underpowered

RSR clone. Without its skin, the new car looked like a four-legged insect and wasn't much bigger than one. Powered by a turbocharged 2.7-liter engine and with a highly modified 914 skin attached, Lennon claimed it was the fastest car he'd ever driven—until just a week before the race when it blew its only engine in

Above: Zwart negotiates Double Cut, winding through some of Pikes Peak's most spectacular scenery. **Below:** Former Viper driver Raymond Guerrero was a Porsche convert in 2015, placing a respectable second in class to Donner.



a big way. So Lennon went back to the RSR for another run up the mountain, hoping for perennial competitor Ralf Christensson to make a mistake.

Raymund Guerrero, who placed second to Veitch in 2014 in a Dodge Viper, showed up with a 2009 997 Turbo S. His Viper had expired the month before, so he needed a race-ready entry, and he needed it quickly. A Porsche fit the bill.

Justin Wilson popped up on social media, entering a 996 GT3 in Time Attack 1. Everyone wondered why a former F1 and current Indycar driver was entering his own 996-based car. Eventually, it became clear that there is more than one Justin Wilson in the world, and this Pikes Peak entrant wasn't the famous one.

Rather than the snoozefest everyone expected, the 2015 race turned out to have more big-name drivers and impressive cars than any iteration since the old Champ Car days when Foyt, Andretti, and the Unsers ran the mountain.

Besides Zwart in TA1 and the Pobst/Donner battle in TA2, Rhys Millen brought a 1,368-hp electric racer that would challenge Nobuhiro "Monster" Tajima's entry to be the first electric car to win overall. Paul Dallenbach's crew worked the bugs out of their open-wheeler. Former Indycar driver Dominic Dobson brought a Radical sports racer. Justin Law arrived with a beautifully prepared Jaguar. Justin Bell was entered in a factory Lexus effort. Road racing veteran Rick Knoop was in a



Right: Chris Lennon's RSR climbs toward the summit. Below: Justin Wilson is all smiles as he meets Justin Wilson. Tragically, the Indycar driver (right) died less than two months later as the result of an accident at Pocono.



smaller Entropy electric car, and Indycar driver Justin Wilson (the famous one) was a late entry in a Honda-entered LMP2 car with an Indy-based turbo engine, though he didn't make the race due to pre-event teething problems.

The pace car was the still secret Acura NSX prototype. Though diehards lament the loss of the gravel days, the paved surfaces are giving new life to the event.

ON RACE DAY, smooth running and good weather meant the motorcycle class was done fairly early, and the cars might be able to finish before the inevitable Rocky Mountain inclement weather moved in. As nice as it looked to spectators, victory was still spiced by frustration for nearly all the top runners.

Rhys Millen's Latvian-entered Drive eO PP03 electric car won overall and set a new class record of 9:07.222, beating Tajima's Rimac E-Runner Concept One by 25 seconds. At the top, Millen revealed that

he lost rear drive about a third of the way up the mountain, meaning he was only using half power for much of the race. He thought a time in the eight-minute range was possible. The last car to run that fast was Sébastien Loeb's Peugeot in 2013.

Zwart finally won in Time Attack 1—his eighth win on the mountain—and finished fourth overall with a class record and personal best of 9:46.243. He was happy with the victory, but again suffered a misfire toward the top of the course, losing

both power and time. He figured the car could go 15 or 20 seconds faster up the mountain in equal conditions.

Justin Wilson used this as a learning year, running his 996 GT3 to a respectable 11:36.902 and taking seventh in class. With no issues all week, he was wearing a smile in every photo. He even got to meet his hero, the other Justin Wilson.

Meanwhile, all eyes were on the Donner/Pobst battle. Would Porsche win yet again, or would Pobst's talent and the power of the Nissan take the



Jeff Zwart's three-year program with the BBI-prepared turbo GT3 Cup finally came to fruition with a class win, a class record, and a personal best time. Here he celebrates his eighth win with wife Terri and daughter Baylee.





A series of heavy storms left a record amount of snow on the mountain, making a dramatic alpine backdrop for Zwart's fire-breathing Porsche.

day? When the time came, Donner repeated the launch control start that had impressed spectators all week to set the Porsche into a strong first section time of 1:51.162. But somewhere in the W section of the course, during the dramatic climbing, braking, and switchbacks, the Sport Plus mode malfunctioned. That meant Donner was down on power for the long, fast sections near the summit, where speed is of utmost importance. He got to the top in 10:26.896, but he knew that the Nissan's power could carry Pobst to a faster time.

Next up was the previous year's Open class winner, Layne Schranz, in his very fast Chevrolet. Unfortunately, his car blew its engine on the lower portion of the course. It was Pobst's turn next, and he was ready to go, his team having just removed

the tire warmers. However, the blown engine had spewed oil and coolant onto the road, and the race was delayed as safety crews cleaned up. Pobst's team put the warmers back on and waited patiently.

On course, very few people knew the reason for the delay. Some had recognized Donner not going as fast as he was capable of and wondered if he hadn't made it to the top. Others thought Schranz had crashed. Slowly, the word came from course officials with radio communication that Donner had set a new class record. Anticipation grew.

From the data sheet, Pobst's crew knew they had a real chance. Compared with Donner's times in testing, something didn't add up. If Pobst had a strong run, they could beat the Porsche. Pobst's professional nature kicked in; he could

smell blood. He put the Nissan's pedal to the metal with a first sector time of 1:49.622, a full second and a half faster than the Porsche on the mostly gentle slopes and fast, sweeping corners of the lower section. Still, that wouldn't be enough. Donner's Porsche had gotten better and better through the twisty mid-section, so Pobst poured it on, taking every chance he could.

Donner could only wait—and wait he did. Word filtered out that the #4 Nissan was off course. *What?* Was it a mechanical? Safety workers radioed in. No, a crash at Sump Corner, a hard, sharp, uphill right-hander with a very late apex. At the top, Donner was relieved to take win number five but wondered, "What happened?"

Guerrero's Porsche came in at 11:13.041, considerably faster than

his time from 2014, putting him a solid second to Donner. Jerad Voight, the Montana Kid, finished third in class with his Camaro.

AS HAPPENS OFTEN in the Rockies, the clouds started gathering and darkening around noon as weather started to move in. Then it came—thunder and lightning, with hard rain on the lower portions and blizzard conditions up top. Chris Lennon was the last one to make it to the summit before the race was stopped for a couple of hours while crews plowed the road and officials waited for the lightning to abate. The upper portions of the course were covered by two inches of slushy snow, and officials decided to run the remaining competitors only halfway, to just below Glen Cove.

To equalize the race, it was decid-


ed that records to the top would stand, but race results would be based only on times to Glen Cove. Amazingly, Lennon's small-displacement RSR was quick on the bottom portion, setting a 1:59.690 against rival Ralf Christensson's 2:08.483. Lennon won the Vintage class for the second time, finishing on the podium for the fourth straight year.

Eventually, the competitors who had made it to the summit were allowed to head down. Because the race was still going on, they had to wait at Glen Cove for the last racer to finish. Competitors got out of their cars and mingled with media and spectators as the spontaneous mood of a party struck. The warmer temperatures down the mountain and the relief that comes after the close of a hard week brought smiles all around—except for Tajima, who took a nap in his car.

Several drivers wondered what had happened to Pobst, and after the race was finished, the competitors climbed back in their cars and headed down the mountain. Almost everyone made a brief stop near Sump Corner, where the wrecker was parked on the outside of the corner. Pobst was giving instructions and was clearly okay. Everyone who saw the wreck wondered, "Wow! How did it get way over there?"

It seems Pobst had come into the 40-mph corner at about 101 mph, skidded straight off the road, made a leap that cleared a pond, and ended up next to a bank about 150 yards off the road. Later, he said that in his enthusiasm he'd lost track of where he was in the course's 156 corners.

AND SO IT WAS. The 2015 edition of the Pikes Peak International Hill Climb, first predicted to be a snooze, was one of the most hotly contested races anyone could remember. It was the first year that an electric car won the race overall, signaling the wave of the future. Zwart made good on the promise of his turbocharged Porsche GT3 Cup hillclimb special and took his eighth win on the mountain. Donner's mountain experience beat Pobst's speed for his fifth title, and Lennon's little team's faith in the underpowered RSR paid off with their second class win.

For Porsche, it was three for three with wins in all three classes entered—and it doesn't get much better than that. If driver and manufacturer interest continues to build, 2016 should be a doozy. 

(continued on page 120)



Above: Rhys Millen's overall win, the first for an electric car, ushered in a new era on Pikes Peak.

Below, left to right: Justin Law, Jeff Zwart, Justin Bell, and Rhys Millen join Fred Veitch at the post-race "interlude" near Glen Cove.



HOW TO LEARN PIKES PEAK IN THREE DAYS

AT 11:00 P.M. ON TUESDAY, JUNE 23, Joe Brenner, the general manager of Porsche of Colorado Springs, got a call on his cell phone advising him that he would shortly be receiving a call from royalty.

"Act naturally," said the voice on the other end. "You're dealing with a racing enthusiast. You may call him Khalid, although he is a sheikh from Qatar. He would like to drive in the Pikes Peak Hill Climb. He will be arriving tomorrow morning with his 918 and his GT3 RS. Which do you think would be the better car? We will need rooms for 30 people."

Brenner paused for a minute before asking, "How did you get this number?" The voice responded, "I used to work for the CIA."

It's a story that would be beyond belief except for two things. One, Sheikh Khalid Al-Thani, a member of the ruling family of Qatar, has been an avid fan of motor racing since he was a kid. Most recently, he was a major sponsor of Al-Anabi Racing, which last year fielded two cars in NHRA's Top Fuel division. The other has to do with his family's Qatar Holding company, which from 2009 to 2013 owned a 10% share of Porsche SE. More recently, an investment group from Qatar (working with Miami Dolphins owner Stephen Ross) has



On race day, Sheikh Khalid Al-Thani of Qatar exhibited restraint and showed respectable speed in his 918.

been rumored to be in negotiations with CVC Capital to purchase a controlling interest in Formula 1. It seems the Qatari are serious about motor racing.

Still, it's not as if anyone can just show up and drive in the Pikes Peak International Hill Climb. The entry deadline was at the end of January. It requires training, dedication, and patience to get a car to the top, let alone win a class. Organizers take the safety of their entrants very seriously and closely scrutinize the competition records and car builds. Gaining entry to the race at this late date would be out of the question, even for someone of wealth and royalty.

However, the PPIHC committee thought there might be some other ways to accommodate the sheikh. If he were to submit to a day of schooling and was able to arrange for some practice time, they would consider letting him do a non-competitive "sweep" run up the mountain between the motorcycle

and automobile classes. But who could be his instructor?

It turns out that last year's Time Attack 2 winner, Fred Veitch, had outfitted his car to take selected media up the mountain for 7/10ths runs during practice days. Veitch is a long-time PCA instructor and was PCA's first national safety chair back in the 1970s. He also sits on the Pikes Peak International Hill Climb board of directors. He was the obvious and immediate choice to give Sheikh Al-Thani a detailed, guided tour of the mountain at speed.

Besides running up the mountain, the sheikh was able to get an entry in the Pikes Peak Airstrip Attack, a top-speed exhibition where supercars such as McLarens, Lamborghinis, and, yes, 918s run for all-out top speeds. Sheikh Al-Thani reportedly reached a very respectable 193 mph in that event on Thursday night before reporting at 4:00 a.m. the next morning to ride up the mountain with Veitch.

Veitch and his royal passenger

made at least a couple of runs on each section and had time between runs for discussion of the proper line, how to avoid the bumps and frost heaves, and the importance of oxygen, hydration, and proper diet, especially for someone coming from sea level.

On Saturday morning, a rest day for competitors, the sheikh rented the road for himself for three hours before 9:00 a.m. so he could practice. He ran a respectable time, in the twelve-minute range, in his 918. Then, on Sunday, he drove the AAP Porsche 918 to the top as an exhibition sweep car with an unofficial time reported to be in the elevens.

Apparently he liked it, because there are already reports that Sheikh Khalid Al-Thani will be returning in 2016 with a team. No one is sure what cars or drivers the team will field, but if his record in NHRA and his quick learning curve in 2015 are any indication, it will be worth watching. —SC

