

# THE LONGEST DAY, 1980. THE DAY OF THE TURBO.

by Bill Fishburne

It's nice to look back at one event in your life and think, in all honesty, that you wouldn't change a thing. That is exactly how I feel about the first Longest Day 24-hour endurance race at Nelson Ledges, Ohio, in 1980. To many of us it was a perfect race. For Saab it was their most significant racing victory ever in the United States. Certainly, it was a surprise to the national media. And it was my honeymoon.

The stage was set for the event in 1976 when Len Lonnegren, then Saab's Director of Public Relations, determined the company needed motorsports visibility in order to sell more cars. Len, and Saab USA president Bob Sinclair, with whom I had been in contact thanks to a tip from Car and Driver editor Pat Bedard, met me at Lime Rock in the fall of 1976 and outlined their plans for a four car team running in four SCCA Divisions. I was the first driver selected, to run in the Central Division. Len asked me who else they should bring on board. I was astounded that they hadn't already contacted Don Knowles, who raced in the Southeast Division from his home in Alexandria, VA. Don was the best SS driver I knew. They did choose him and he rewarded them with National Championships in 1978 and 1979.

We presented ourselves in SCCA events in 1977 and got thumped badly by the Alfa Duetto Sypder, a fuel-injected 2-seat sports car that was placed in the SSB category rather than where it belonged in SSA. We soldiered on through the year, won occasionally, and learned a lot. In 1978 Len's factory sponsored Saab 99s won division championships in the NE, SE, Central and NP divisions. Four cars, four championships. Much the same thing occurred in 1979 driving the Saab 99 Turbo in SSA. Great car. I won the SCCA Cendiv title while Don captured both the SE Division and the National Championship at Road Atlanta.

Sales went up. Enthusiasm was high and SCCA paddocks, infield and starting grids were full of Saabs. Things took a turn for the worse in 1980 when Saab gave us the then-new 900 Turbo. It wasn't quite as fast as the old 99 Turbo. It was a bit heavier, had the same engine, same brakes, and didn't turn in as well on high speed corners without a lot of left foot braking.

These factors reduced the team's chances in sprint races. So how could Saab keep their momentum in motor sports?

The answer came in the form of a new race to be run in Ohio. It would be the nation's only 24-hour race for production street cars and anyone could enter who had an SCCA approved Showroom Stock car. I discussed the idea with Lonnegren and he was enthusiastic but wondered how much publicity the race would really generate. We worked on that for a week or two. Throughout the previous two seasons I had hung out at the tracks with Rich Ceppos, an Associate Editor of Car and Driver magazine, who was driving a factory assisted Saab 99. I called Rich to see if he and the magazine staffers would be interested in racing a Turbo 900 at Nelson.

The original idea was that the Car and Driver editors would team up with Knowles in his 900 Turbo while I would co-drive with two writers from Road & Track magazine. Thus we'd have the two leading enthusiast magazines pitted against one another in identical Saabs, and may the best book win.

Lonnegren bought the idea and agreed to pay for it. I began to put together enough crew members to field two cars in a 24 hour race. Since I'd never done anything like that I enlisted the aid of Preston Miller, a long time friend and owner of Miller & Norburn, a BMW racing shop in Durham, NC. He had entered several cars in the Daytona 24 hour race, and quickly agreed to do our little event at Nelson Ledges.

Meanwhile, Road & Track editor John Dinkel and competition editor Joe Rusz agreed to participate. All that remained was to finalize the agreement with Car and Driver.

That didn't happen. Don Sherman, then Car and Driver Technical Editor, was a Mazda man. He and editor Pat Bedard had experience racing Mazda's rotary engine cars and were not persuaded that a turbocharged four cylinder in a tall sedan would be competitive in terms of either reliability or speed. So, instead of being on the Saab team, Car and Driver decided to enter their own Mazda RX-7 with support from Mazda and the Racing Beat engine tuning shop.

With that news we scrubbed our second car and combined Knowles, Dinkel, Rusz and myself in the car I was campaigning that year in SCCA Nationals. Car and Driver's Mazda automatically became our number one competition with Bedard, Sherman, Ceppos and novice Larry Griffin at the wheel. Motor Trend got into the act by allowing staff writer Peter Frey to co-drive a very fast factory sponsored Porsche 924 with Carlos Rodriguez and Garth Ullom. Two time SCCA National Champion in SSA, D.J. (Fuzzy) Fazekas, also co-drove a 924 with Freddy Baker, another former National Champion.

Another team that looked strong on paper was fielded by Trinity Racing which brought four RX-7's in an 18 wheel hauler from California. There were so many people with the team that, at times, it seemed that every other person you met was with Trinity. I was impressed.

There were 21 cars in the final field and most of them were fielded by very good teams. We were totally unprepared for the blistering times set in qualifying by the Ullom / Ramirez 924. They set a new SSA lap record of 1:26 around the fast, two mile Nelson Ledges road course. Knowles qualified our car 4<sup>th</sup> at a stately 1:29.5.

We were a bit different. We were there for the publicity and our blatant self promotion knew no bounds. By special arrangement with everyone I drove the first shift carrying 220 lb. Fred Griffith, a Cleveland television personality and his 40 pound battery powered TV camera. Fred and I conversed during the two hour stint until I began to lose my concentration and Fred just plain turned green. Driving conservatively to save the tires and fuel the best times I could muster were in the 1:32 range. About an hour into the race the faster cars began to lap us, led by Ullom.

After an hour and 15 minutes, the other cars began making their pit stops. First the Mazdas, then the Porsches, finally the Mustang V-8. I was delighted to see the C/D Mazda stop so soon. My feelings had been hurt when Bedard had failed to even wave when he put me a lap down. The early pit stops by the leaders set the tone for the race. It meant we were competitive, depending upon exactly how long we could stay out and how fast we were able to refuel, service the car and get back out.

An hour and 45 minutes passed. Fred and I kept going. The other crew chiefs wandered down pit lane

to ask when we planned to stop. Their faces revealed the same amazement felt by the Babylonian king when he saw the handwriting on the wall. The race was not to be won on the track but it surely would be lost in the pits.

At exactly the two-hour mark I dove into the pits. The little 14 gallon gas tank took 13.5 gallons from two NASCAR dump cans funneled through the required one inch restrictor. Lead mechanics David Wolfe and Shaylor Duncan changed both front tires, checked the brake pads and had us going again in less than two minutes. During that time Fred and I climbed out and I was replaced by John Dinkel. Refueling had been perfectly accomplished by Chas Conklin, a New York advertising executive who had no trouble at all with the 90 pound NASCAR gas cans.

We were in 4th place after the stop, an improvement from 7th when the other cars started their round of pit stops. What that meant was that there was still a race going on. We had to keep stretching our stops and improve our speed in order to get into the lead. The other teams had plenty of speed, but had to stretch their stops.

Car and Driver held a team meeting. What would happen if they saved the brakes and ran the same pads for the full distance? It would save them about ten minutes in the pits at the cost of a second or so per lap that would be lost with less aggressive braking.

Trinity made a similar decision. Meanwhile, Ramirez, Ron Smaldone and Fazekas were burning up the track. By the end of the third hour our Saab was, once again, a full lap down.

We had several things going for us that should be noted. First of all, my bride of 10 days, Barbara, had organized our food program so that no one had to wander off to find food. There were plenty of hamburgers at all times plus bacon and eggs in the morning in our small motorhome to keep the mechanics, tire busters and drivers focused. Secondly, Barbara and Debbie Perdue, David Wolfe's girlfriend, had organized our timing and scoring effort to keep two ladies in the scoring tower at all times.

That became important in the night when a scoring error moved us down an extra lap. Debbie pitched a fit, demanded a recount, nearly got in a fist fight and we regained the lost ground. Without Debbie, Barbara and the other ladies we'd not have won.

Meanwhile, the battle on the track became serious. Ron Smaldone's car landed on its roof going into the Carousel turn. A Pinto (remember when?) went greasy side up at the Oak Tree turn, and the only Fiesta entered flipped through the high speed kink on the back straight. The Trinity cars suffered from inadequate preparation and poor driving. They had come from Southern California expecting a cakewalk and found they were in a 24 hour sprint race on a track none of them had ever seen before. The Porsches began to suffer a variety of mechanical problems that required major pit attention.

By Midnight the event was a two-car contest with our Saab against the incredibly fast Car and Driver Mazda. On the aggregate, Knowles and I lost a half second a lap to Bedard, Sherman and Ceppos. We had Griffin covered. I took over from Don at 4 a.m. following the most phenomenal pit stop you could imagine. Preston had trained the crew well so they changed all four tires, added a quart of oil, replaced

front and rear brake pads, put in the usual 13.5 gallons of gas and got going again in four minutes flat.

The crew's effort was so special and inspiring that I drove two two-hour stints back to back while Don rested in the motor home. Lap times in the cool humid morning air came down, down, down, until we were at 1:27.5. At that pace we were the fastest car on the track and two full seconds faster than our best time in daylight.

It was the most memorable race of my life. A faint ground mist had fallen as I took the wheel but never became a dense fog. The headlights of the other cars were intense yet as you got into the flow of traffic everything assumed an order and logic that was so real you could touch it. You caught and passed some cars quickly; you raced with other cars and worked hard to keep other headlight patterns well behind you.

As we moved towards sunup the edges of the road became more visible. The air seemed to lighten and ghostly images in the background hardened through the mist. Soon I could see the road beyond the hot center of the driving light beams and soon, too, the ghostly images became trees and signs and other familiar landmarks.

The campers began to stir before the sun was fully up. The car ran perfectly and the cool morning air was fresh with the scent of bacon and eggs. It was strange, I thought, to smell the campfires and food, to notice the odor, and to appreciate it despite all the other sensations and smells that were a part of driving the car. The morning light heralded an all-out sprint to the finish.

As we continued to push the car in the heat of the day our fuel economy fall off to a maximum of an hour and 45 minutes between stops. Every shift was at or past the redline and engine braking with heel and toe downshifts was essential to get the car slowed down for the turns. Tire wear was also a problem. We had shaven too much Pirelli P-6 tread from the vital left fronts resulting in rapid wear. We were into the belts before every pit stop but we didn't stop until the fuel ran out. The steel belts made a strange sound on the hot asphalt; like spraying a concrete surface with water from a hose.

Appreciate this: John Dinkel and Joe Rusz were the only reason we were in the race at all. Saab would never have financed the deal without their participation. We hoped for good editorial coverage but no promises had been made. Indeed, there weren't even any discussions about it. It was all in their hands. They had made significant contributions to the team as individuals and we benefitted from their presence, their organizational abilities, their hard work in the pits and on the car, and from their driving assistance. So we all drove as hard as we possibly could. We knew that if we crashed, or lost to the Mazda, we would be the goats of the race and total jerks

That morning in Connecticut, Len Lonnegren decided to fly out to Cleveland and see how the race was going. Saab's pitiful little racing budget was being stretched by this event and he wondered, quite frankly, if Bedard and Sherman weren't right. Maybe a highly stressed turbo four wasn't the right car for an endurance race. He checked the weather report. Nelson Ledges was in the middle of a summer high pressure center. It was hot and getting hotter.

This being in the pre cell phone era there was no way to contact the team at the track. Were they still

running? Or had they blown early and gone home? What would Bob Sinclair say if that happened? How many full page magazine ads could have been purchased with the money he'd invested in this adventure? What if the car crashed and Fred Griffith, the TV guy, was hurt?

A hundred thoughts ran through his mind as he drove from Orange to Hartford and boarded the commuter flight to LaGuardia. An hour later his flight lifted off, and by 10 a.m. he landed at Cleveland Hopkins Airport. He rented a car and drove 45 minutes to the track. "Is the Saab still running?" He asked the ticket taker. "It's leading," was the reply. Lonnegren said a quiet prayer of thanksgiving and drove across the bridge into the paddock. The green Saab came tearing by as he crossed with a little white Mazda on its tail.

That duel was between myself and Don Sherman. I drove my last stint in the hottest part of a hot summer day with a dehydration and stress caused migraine headache clouding my mind, I struggled to hold the lead Knowles had handed me. But Sherman ground me down. Half a second here, a quarter of a second there, it took an hour, but eventually the little white Wankel was right behind me. On the same lap.

I played traffic against him. I got a block from the Peugeot 604 on the back straight. I set a moving screen with Joe Nonnamaker's VW Rabbit in turn one, passing on the outside. Sherman took him on the inside going into turn two. It all came to a head in the left-hand turn three, the Oak Tree turn. I held the inside line going in with one of the black Trinity Mazdas on my right. Sherman went to the outside and braked late, trying to sweep around the Trinity car and my green Saab.

It didn't work. The Trinity driver woke up, got brave, and late braked both of us. That put Sherman in an impossible situation. He skidded sideways off the track and came to a harmless halt in the grass, but lost 20 seconds in the process. On the next lap around, Preston gave me a thumbs up. My head hurt so badly I didn't acknowledge his signal. I was drained, and the adrenalin the duel with Sherman had caused was wearing off. Two laps later, Preston called me in. There was an hour and a half left in the race and Knowles could finish without another stop.

I stumbled out of the car, retching and shivering in the 100 degree heat. Lennie and Barbara took me to the medical tent for ice, fluids and a pain reliever. The team, meanwhile, packed away the major spare parts and waited nervously for the drama to play out. It ended as it had begun. With 45 minutes to go and the Mazda nearly a lap down, Sherman pitted for fuel and tires. Knowles kept going and was two laps ahead when the stops were over. A 924 was third but was later disqualified. I never found out why.

One by one the other crews came down pit lane to offer congratulations. Bedard, Ceppos and Griffin led the way. We laughed, we drank champagne, we hugged and we cried.

The Longest Day of 1980 was over. It was won by a team of people who cared for each other and worked together to achieve a goal. And it was made possible by a wonderful man, Len Lonnegren, who believed in us, and in his car.