

Reed Kryder's Story of his first Longest Day in 1981

The story which follows is not about one of my professional races. This race happened prior to my first professional race, but it had a lot to do with my becoming a professional race driver. Twenty-four hour races, like this story, are long. There were so many mini-stories happening at the same time. Many memories remain from that weekend in June of 1981. Sandi and I had been autocrossing since 1971 and racing since 1975. We enjoyed many successes over the years. During the Winter of 1978/9 we sold our original Datsun 240Z and started the search for a replacement. We returned to SCCA amateur racing mid-Summer 1981 with a new Datsun 280ZX. This "Longest Day" race preceded the new car's first race by two weeks. The year before a new type of racing started at Nelson Ledges Road Course with the inaugural "Longest Day of Nelson" 24-Hour Race for Showroom Stock vehicles. The race evolved into an incredible race-long dual between the "Car & Driver" and "Road & Track" entries. Extensive magazine coverage greatly increased interest in the 1981 event. One of the 1980 entrants, a group racing a Fiat 124 Spyder invited me to join their effort in 1981. Then early in the week of the race Track Manager John McGill called. There was an individual who wanted to race a Mazda RX-7 but had no race driving experience. John somehow convinced the driver that was not a problem. The car itself also had no race preparation. It was stock, except for an aftermarket turbo which made it illegal for any of the recognized Showroom Stock Classes. However, there was a Prototype class for factory backed entries and John assured us he would get the car approved if we could get it prepared. John had also contacted a couple of other drivers and they wanted to attempt it. Two big questions needed to be answered. Could the car be completed in time and what would happen if the owner was denied the opportunity to actually drive his, now modified, car? And what about the ride in the Fiat? Kryderacing was already in the business of selling parts. We had the required safety equipment, including a bolt-in roll bar, in stock. Nighttime driving lights, decals, extra wheels, spare brake pads, and other parts could be acquired easily. Practice was due to start Friday morning and while most of the work to be done was relatively easy it still would require a lot of man-hours. Arrangements were made for everyone to be at the track Thursday afternoon ready to work on the car through the night. The car and its owner were the only ones who showed up late. He planned to simply register before driving the car back home for the evening. He was enthusiastic but totally clueless. All the work had been previously discussed with him, but somehow a connection was never made in his mind. We worked on the car as long as we could before the owner took it home. Meanwhile he still hadn't been granted approval to race. Would he be denied to drive on Friday? Would he then take his car and go home? At least there was still the Fiat ride. You'll notice the car owner's name is never mentioned. The reasons will become apparent as you read on. He returned with the car early Friday morning. We finished enough work to get the car on the track shortly after practice started. All the drivers took a turn driving and we found a couple of problems with the driving team. Tom and Terry Abbott, father and a son, were both driving. Terry was quick enough but turning inconsistent lap times. All of us were new to endurance racing but knew we had to drive quickly while preserving the car. Terry was new to racing itself and his inconsistent laps indicated he was struggling to maintain the pace being set. We made the decision to use him only in reserve. As a side note, Terry went on to many race victories in the future, many of them driving with his dad. Another driver issue involved Bob Ritz. Bob was very experienced and quick, but all of his previous racing had been done with front-wheel drive cars. The RX-7 was rear-wheel drive. Bob was lapping within two seconds of the rest of us when he spun the car in turn twelve. He knew he was struggling. We gave him a few extra laps to settle down. It was also becoming apparent the car owner would not be allowed to drive. Fortunately he seemed to be accepting it. One interesting development occurred when I was driving in that morning session. The car owner had paid the entry fee, Kryderacing for parts supplied, and had made arrangements for gas, tires, and assistance by two professional mechanics who would be there race-day to help with pit-stops. Sandi and I were camping at the track but we

wanted to deposit the car owner's check ASAP. Bob Ritz was going home Thursday evening and he said he knew someone very well at the bank and would get it handled. At that time we were becoming increasingly leery of the car owner. Bob said he could also get the check validated. He was to let me know as soon as he got to the track if there was a problem. Not wanting to alert anyone else, a simple thumbs up or down upon his arrival would suffice. Bob arrived as I pulled out on the track for my first lap. At the completion of that lap Bob was at the guard rail with his arm out and thumb down. Upon pitting the next lap the crew asked what was wrong. I simply asked for the car owner to stick his head in the window. The shocked look on his face when informed his check had bounced said many things. After a few excuses he promised to pay Sandi in cash. At that point in time only the car owner, myself, and Bob knew there had been a problem. Laps during the three hour afternoon session all counted towards qualifying. Bob was asked to take the RX-7 out first. He protested saying it was qualifying and someone faster needed to drive the car. We told him we had all afternoon to qualify and it was more important to get him comfortable in the car. He ran for about six laps, got within a second of everyone else's lap times, and pitted to tell us he was comfortable. When told to take the car to the paddock, Bob said someone needed to qualify the car. We told him he just had. For an endurance race it was more important to prepare the car properly than try to move up the grid another spot or two. We were rookies but learning fast. The rest of the afternoon was spent installing extra lights, the rest of the decals, and discussing plans. Discussing plans was very time consuming since no one had done this type of racing. During the dinner break I officially withdrew from the Fiat team. They had been, and still are, very good friends. I still feel bad asking them to delay finding a replacement driver for the entire day. The nighttime practice rules stipulated the time was to be used for setting lights and no one was to go fast. Night racing was new to 90+% of the field. Someone else had made headlight adjustments prior to my turn in the car. I drove horribly and was never comfortable or consistent with my "line". Headlight glare from behind added to the difficulty. After about six frustrating laps I had had enough. As soon as I indicated I was pitting, the car stopped running and coasted to a stop at pit exit. Back in the paddock, the crew also seemed unhappy about more than the car problem. My horrible driving must have been very obvious. It turned out my lap times were actually a second quicker than during the day and they thought we might get in trouble with the officials. The officials never mentioned it and the car problem turned out to be an electrical short. Two lessons were learned that evening. Cool nighttime air increases horsepower, and tunnel vision reduces distractions. Knowing these things, relaxing behind the wheel, and accepting the headlight glare resulted in even faster lap times. Nighttime driving is a lot of fun. Race day arrived and the team was ready. We were last of the six Prototype entries on the grid. The other five prototypes were all factory backed cars and strong contenders. But the strongest contenders were the Porsche 924 entries. The 924's were the latest from Porsche and approved for the SSA class. Porsche brought about half-a-dozen examples with first-class drivers and crews. Most of the Porsches qualified up front. We didn't think we could beat everyone ahead of us but we knew we would catch some of them. The two expert mechanics hired to help with pit stops would also help. We were holding our own following the start of the race. Then came our first pit stop. In those days a two-minute pit stop was good. Fuel flowed slowly and driver changes took time. Our first stop took over eight minutes. Nothing went wrong, we were just slow. It turns out the two expert mechanics were very good mechanics but had no experience with pit-stops. Everyone was upset, but instead of getting mad at each other they discussed ways to improve. The next stop took about six minutes. Then four minutes. By Sunday sunrise we were amongst the fastest of all the teams. But those early stops had us down many laps. As the race wore on we slowly moved up the charts. We were getting quicker and experiencing only minor mechanical issues while other cars were not as fortunate. In the middle of the night Sandi approached me, and tentatively asked "Do you mind if I take a nap while you are driving?" We had been racing for years and she had always been in the pits when I was on track. As Sandi slept I found myself following John Buffum on the track. John was also driving a Mazda RX-7 and was known to be a great rally driver and very good road racer. John's lines through the turns deserved studying. Another lesson was learned by following him. Most

race drivers strive for the fastest line and then try to repeat it. Rally drivers simply throw the car into the turn and catch it. Sometimes it looks as if they are driving a dirt sprint car. While lacking the appearance of a consistent path, the “throw and catch” approach was impressive and fast. After being entertained for several laps our turbo helped me pass him on the long straight. I raced again against John years later in “The One Lap of America and am still impressed by his style of driving. Sunday morning arrived and we were starting to look like contenders. The other Prototypes had had problems and were well behind us. By mid-morning we were second overall, running equal lap times to the leader, but many laps behind. The leading Porsche was being driven by friends Cat Kizer, Freddy Baker, and a few other talented drivers. They had the race won if there were no problems. Our RX-7 was the only threat to the win Porsche had invested so much effort into acquiring for their new 924. Their remaining cars had experienced various problems and were laps behind us. Late Sunday morning I started to catch a Porsche which was several hours behind due to an early race accident. Being marginally faster it took our RX-7 a few laps to catch and pass the 924. Then the Porsche hit me entering a turn. The hit was mild and the Mazda recovered, staying ahead. Only to be hit again. This was a new experience. Remembering the talent level of the Porsche drivers I figured I was too slow entering the turn. Not wanting to take unnecessary chances, the smart decision was to let the 924 pass. He led a lap or two, and then let me pass. Then the “love taps” started again. Could they be intentional? A few laps later I slowed dramatically on the long straight, as if something had broken, allowed the Porsche to roar by and obtain a substantial lead. But before long the gap was rapidly closing. My initial thoughts were “here we go again”. The next thought was “not this time”. After passing him the RX-7 started turning record lap times and about ten laps later the gap between the two cars was several seconds. Before finishing this story you need to understand we had no radios, only hand signals. Late in this 45-minute battle I was starting to wonder if I was doing the right thing. Should a good finish be risked by driving so hard or was there some better way to avoid being hit? As if reading my mind Tim Evans was standing at the pit wall, giving me a gigantic thumbs-up. That thumbs-up meant so much to me. During my Race Tire Engineering days at Goodyear I had gotten to know a lot of professional drivers. Only Elliot Forbes Robinson had ever seen me race the old 240Z. He had been helpful and complimentary. Tim was the Can-Am Under 2-Liter Champion. He was the pro we all judged ourselves against. His “thumbs up” signal affirmed my on-track decisions. Follow-up discussions changed my future. He later told me “you drive like a pro”. The bothersome Porsche pitted shortly before my stint was up. My crew informed me the “battle” resulted in the 924 driver, Hurley Haywood, being carried away in an ambulance. Actually, an opening between the rear hatch and lower bodywork from its Saturday accident allowed exhaust fumes to enter his car. Whether these fumes had anything to do with his bumping me doesn’t matter. What’s remembered is someone saying “you drive like a pro”. Less than a year after this race I would be driving an IMSA GTU car in professional races. Tim Evans replaced me in the race car and drove the last two stints. We were now catching the leader but still too many laps behind. Our strategy was to push hard and hope they experienced problems which would allow us to close the gap. Tim wasn’t going to let anything slow him down. Back then all of the cars had mufflers and you could hear Tim from all around the track as he frequently blasted away on the horn at slower cars. He made up several laps over those last three hours but the leaders were flawless. We ended up a lap behind, second overall, and first in Prototype. During the last hour of the race Jim Alexander, Goodyear Sports Car Race Tire Sales Manager told me to inform the car owner he was impressed with our performance and there would be no tire invoice. As a last minute entry I had been able to secure only one set of tires based on my job at Goodyear. Anything else required a check, which the car owner supplied. By the way, we also appeared in numerous Goodyear ads for the next several months. Leaving the track, another new lesson was learned. Our personal car at the time was a Mazda RX-7. Other than safety items it was identical to the race car. Both drove and felt the same. Shortly after exiting the track Sandi, in the passenger seat, started to look worried. Turns out the car was accelerating past 90 miles per hour and the throttle was still floored. Fortunately there were no law enforcement officers around. Following the race everyone assembled at the car owner’s house for a big celebration. The house overlooked Lake Erie and the party was a great one. Our victorious Mazda RX-7 had been left at the track after brake fluid started leaking from the calipers following Tim’s last run. Most of us never saw the car or its

owner again. But we did hear several stories. The car ended up at the shop co-owned by the two expert mechanics. They were awaiting payment for work done before and during the event. As time passed we heard the entry fee check, the gas check, and several other checks bounced. Fortunately Bob Ritz was able to catch our bad check. And thank goodness Jim tore up the check made out to my then employer, Goodyear. The number of new experiences and lessons learned during this race would serve Kryderacing well in future years. Many of the lessons actually struck home weeks, months, and years later. We had a very inexperienced team at what we were attempting, but there was experience in a variety of cars and we all worked well together. The succession of pit-stops throughout the race typified the entire effort for the weekend. The initial eight-minute disaster evolved to one of the fastest and most polished routines on pit road. Even Tim Evans, with his professional experience, was new to endurance racing. While everyone looked to him for guidance he offered it only in areas where he had experience. The rest of the time he chose to be just another person offering possible solutions to a problem. Maybe part of our success was because we were all rookies and no one knew what to tell anyone else to do. We all learned in the process. And the rest of my life would soon start to change.