



ONLY THE STRONG

It takes guts, stamina and desire to compete in a 24-hour race. The PM team had

It starts with two parade laps. Forty colorful cars guided by 40 nervous drivers snake two-by-two around the twisty, two-mile **Nelson**

contests, everybody wants to be first into the first turn and lead the first lap.

Forty throttle feet hit the floor-



SURVIVE!

No. 1 driver Fred Baker (above) zips along at speed behind the wheel of the Popular Mechanics-sponsored Porsche 944. Below: PM's race crew makes the final headlight adjustment the night before the big event.

comes out of the turn, accelerating toward the next. The other comes out backward, careening across the trackside grass. It is our Porsche.

"Nuts!" I say to no one in particular. "Freddy's spun!"

"One lap down, just 24 hours to go," proclaims the announcer cheerily as the leaders pass the start/finish line. I head for the pits.

It takes Fred Baker several minutes to muscle through the traffic back up to fourth and another hour and a half, thrashing the car as hard as it will go, to take over the lead. Then he has to pit for fuel. It's my turn to drive.

The crew dumps in 15 gallons of gas, checks the oil, the tires and all



PM photos: Dave Klein and Thom Carroll



Outstanding pit work by the Bedford Porsche+Audi crew kept PM's freight train on track and on schedule. The rearrangement of the bodywork was courtesy of an errant Pinto. Note cleverly applied wheel mark on the Porsche's door. The factory-backed Chevy Camaro (right) took pole, with Baker placing our Porsche in second.

the usual stuff. Freddy helps buckle me in, and in a bit over two minutes, I'm off.

Accelerating out of the pits, I know everyone expects me to drive as hard as Baker to hold onto the lead. Damn, I think, this is no way to run an endurance race.

I get up to speed and try to relax behind the wheel. I push as hard as I dare, threading through the many slower cars as quickly and carefully as possible. With 40 cars on a two-mile course, the traffic at times seems like rush hour. I keep reminding myself that there are 22 hours to go in this madness.

The Nelson Ledges/Quaker State Longest Day, as the madness is called (because it's run on the weekend closest to the summer solstice, the day with the most daylight of the year), has become the country's second most important 24-hour auto race. Actually, the only other one is the famous Dayto-



na 24-Hour in February. Longest Day was conceived three years ago by the people who run the Nelson Ledges track near Warren, Ohio, and by the Northeast Ohio Region of the Sports Car Club of America (SCCA) for SCCA Showroom Stock-class cars. Let's make it fun, and inexpensive, they reasoned, so almost anyone can come out and play.

The first Longest Day took place two summers ago. I was on a dealer-sponsored Porsche team co-driving a Show-

room Stock A-class 924. We qualified fastest and started from the pole, but failed to finish. A factory-backed, professionally run Saab Turbo won that event, and two of the co-drivers in it were *Road & Track* magazine editors. Second place went to a factory-assisted Mazda RX-7 that was prepared, entered and run by a team from *Car and Driver*. Thus began the factory vs. factory and magazine vs. magazine tooth-and-nail competition that has fast become a Longest Day tradition.



Expert strategist Joe Oldham (foot on fender) presides over crew and (left to right in front) drivers Gary Witzenburg, Tony Assenza, Bob Nikol and Fred Baker. Despite a few negative predictions from some, the 924's motor ran unfailingly strong.



Last year, I co-drove another Porsche 924 entered by Porsche-Audi Motor Cars of Bedford, Ohio. A new wrinkle was provided with the creation of a Prototype class for cars not yet eligible under the strict Showroom Stock (unmodified except for safety equipment) rules. Ford responded by entering an immaculately prepared Ford EXP for Car and Driver and a matching Mercury LN-7 for Road & Track. Also present were a pair of factory-assisted Datsun 280ZX Turbos, with drivers from Autoweek, the weekly car magazine. On Track magazine was also represented. Our Porsche 924 ended up the overall winner in '81.

With the 1982 event looking bigger and better yet, the opportunity seemed ripe for Popular Mechanics to get involved.

Fred Baker of Bedford Porsche-Audi and partner Bob Nikol were already planning to repeat their 1981 win this year with a brand-new Porsche 944. Several hundred phone calls between Baker and PM Executive Editor Joe Oldham and the deal was struck. It would be a team effort between Popular Mechanics and Bedford Porsche-Audi. The drivers would be Baker, Nikol, myself and PM Auto Editor Tony Assenza. Oldham would act as team manager. Additional support would come from CRC Chemical and Good-year.

I glance up in my mirror and one of the turbo Mustangs, the Car and Driver car, is coming up fast from behind. He has a bunch more horsepower and more acceleration out of the turns than I do, and it's obvious that I can't hold him off for long. A few laps later, he rockets past on the long back straight. I try to stay with him and do for a while,

distance. Again, I remind myself that there are many hours to go.

More time and a lot more laps go by. Suddenly, I find myself catching that same Car and Driver Mustang again. The driver is giving the car a breather, not going as quickly as before. But as soon as he sees me in his mirrors, he picks up the pace. And the chase begins again.

I attach the Porsche to his bumper like a trailer, drafting him as much as possible down the straights, crowding him into the corners, occasionally sticking a nose inside him looking for a chance to pass. But every time I move up alongside, he turns in and chops me off so close I have to nail the brakes and sometimes put a wheel off in the dirt to keep from T-boning his door.

We're three hours into a 24-hour endurance and this idiot's driving it like it's a 30-minute sprint. He flails at the wheel, ready and willing to wreck us both rather than let me by. I normally would be content to follow at a prudent distance. But he is going a second or two a lap slower than I, holding me up, costing us valuable time that might make a difference later on.

Apparently, the Mustang's brakes

are hot now from his earlier, faster pace. He brakes a lot sooner than I want to for the fast, right-hand turns one and two. He sends me off through the third-gear, left-hand turn four and the long, bumpy, decreasing-radius Carousel right, then pulls away on power down the back straight. I catch him again at the 110-mph, right-hand kink toward the end of the straight. As he brakes slightly for it, I sail through flat out at 6,000 rpm in fourth without lifting off the gas.

Then I try another pass, going into the next third-gear left turn a bit deeper under braking. The Porsche's plastic nose almost gets crunched for my trouble. I follow him through the tight right hairpin final turn, tuck in under his bumper, and try to stay with him accelerating down the front straight, past the start/finish and into turn one again.

This goes on, lap after lap, turn after turn. I push him, making him use up his brakes and tires and fuel. But his tactics are getting on my nerves. If blocking was racing, I think, this guy would be national champion. I keep hoping for a mistake on his part, a bobble, a miscue

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Car and Driver's SVO Mustang was dead and buried before nightfall, eventually winding up in a distant

ONLY THE STRONG SURVIVE

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of some sort that will get him out of shape long enough to let me slip by.

But it is not he who makes the mistake. As I rush up on his tail for what seems like the umpteenth-hundredth time coming out of the kink, there is a much slower car in the middle of the track. The Mustang ducks left. I try the right, hoping the other car will squeeze him off to the inside of the coming left turn and leave me room around the outside. Instead, it dodges right. I manage

to miss it, but end up with all four wheels in the still-damp grass. One lary half-spin and a short wait for traffic later, I am underway. The Mustang is long gone.

About an hour later, our third driver, Bob Nikol, gets himself hit by a slower car he is passing in the kink. He takes a wild, spinning ride through the pucker-brush. The car sucks up a lot of mud and grass, and bends a left front fender. But that would be our last mistake in what would turn out to be an ultrahigh-pressure 24-hour sprint to the finish.

With everyone congregating at the

track for Friday morning practice, our beautifully prepared, gleaming red Popular Mechanics Porsche 944 definitely looked like the car to beat. But the competition was super-strong. Ford's Special Vehicle Operations (SVO) group showed up with a brace of prototype turbocharged, fuel-injected, intercooled Mustangs for arch-rivals Car and Driver and Road & Track.

Stiff competition

Ford's support was so deep that they were able to pull the Car and Driver Mustang off the track at 3:30 the next morning after one of the drivers had blown the engine, put an entirely new engine in the car, and have it back on the track within four hours.

As it turned out, however, the Ford SVO threat never materialized and the overkill was for naught. They finished in 33rd and 34th places out of 40 cars.

There were also a couple of fast 5.0-liter, four-barrel, V8-powered Prototype Mustangs, one co-driven by three past national champions, two of whom were Ford engineers. Toyota and Mazda were represented by a pair each of Prototype Celica Supras and RX-7 GSIs. Chrysler had a matched set of Dodge Charger 2.2s in the Showroom Stock B class, one of them factory-entered. Peugeot also had a factory-entered car, a 505 turbodiesel.

The media represented by a variety of cars and/or drivers included Car and Driver, Road & Track, Autoweek, Motor Trend, On Track, Import Car, Gallery, The New York Times, and the TV show, Motorweek Illustrated. And of course, us.

But way down at the far end of the pits was the team that would give us the most fits: an immaculate, stock-looking but very trick Prototype Chevrolet Camaro Z28 entered by Dick Guldstrand Racing, but obviously financed and supported by Chevrolet.

Everything went well in practice that day and into the night, with Baker qualifying us second on the grid, about a second back of the Camaro and a tenth of a second up on the Car and Driver turbo Mustang. Our car was wonderful, its fully independent suspension, 50/50 weight distribution (front engine, rear transmission) and four-wheel vented disc brakes helping us make up in cornering and braking what we lost to the more powerful V8 and turbocharged cars on the straights. It was also very stable, forgiving and easy to drive fast through the turns, even on the bumpy Nelson Ledges surface. Its only vice was a tendency for the rear end to step out a bit under hard braking into a turn. Just as importantly, the flared, air-dammed, spoilered 944 looked like a race car.



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