

Memories of the 1980 SSA race at Nelson Ledges

In late 1979 three of us wannabe rookies decided that we needed to go racing. After a boozy San Francisco lunch that went on too long we decided that IMSA GTU was the way to go. John Casey, Steve Dietrich and I set out to get some cars built. We had decided on Mazda RX7 and managed to start construction for an early 1980 launch. The three of us signed up for Bob Bondurant's 5 day comp school at Sears Point Raceway. Along the way John found and bought an 18 wheeler with a stacker trailer.

Steve already owned a silver '79 RX7 which we used for SCCA rookie races at Holtville and Willow Springs. We would later use that car at Nelson.

In February of 1980 we entered the Daytona 24 race despite having no comp licenses. John Bishop of IMSA just shook his head but let us run. We finished 5th and 8th, I believe. (Those were the days!) Six weeks later saw us at Sebring where we finished 4th and 6th.

Back in SF, we had heard about a race solely for Showroom Stock cars and a 24 hour race at that! It was scheduled for mid June and we couldn't wait to sign up! Apparently, it was to be run at some track that no one we knew had ever heard of, a place called Nelson Ledges somewhere in NE Ohio. At that point we only had Steve Dietrich's "silver bullet" to enter. John and Steve had, by then, developed some contacts within Mazda Comp and managed to get them to "loan" us a pair of black '79's probably from the executive pool. With 3 cars to enter we took them to Peter Dawe's Porsche shop in LA for roll bars and general race prep.

It was at this point that the tractor-trailer driver quit. (You just can't make this up!) Dawe, being the enterprising guy that he is to this day, made some calls. Seems that he knew a guy who knew a guy and up steps a man about 6'7" tall who had a commercial license and had just finished a 2 year stint for aggravated assault. We immediately nicknamed him "too tall". His name is Mark Turnley and he became a huge asset to the team driving for us for several years.

Jim Cook of Datsun fame joined us and supplied some 20 new tires wrapped in yellow plastic. Impressive! With everything loaded we left LA and made Nelson 54 hours later. Arriving on Thursday, we fretted about crossing that little bridge into the paddock until Too Tall said screw it, jumped in the truck and hauled ass over the bridge. In the paddock we unloaded the cars, parking them at an angle to the trailer like Bob Tullius would do in the sixties with his Triumphs. One sad note was a guy next to us towing a VW Rabbit with his whole family in a VW bus. He looked over our stuff, shook his head and said "I can't compete against this". He left and we felt bad because we were running SSA and he was SSB. Why not stick around?

We had some notable drivers on the team including Herbert Gomez from Puerto Rico and Patty Phieffer from Socal somewhere. Herbert arrived on the scene with an envelope full of cash and nothing less than a Jeroboam of Don Q rum!

Speaking of Herbert, Friday was qualifying and as I made my way back to the paddock, I rounded the back of the trailer to find Herbert ready in his new blue Simpson suit and sipping on a can of Budweiser. I about blew a gasket telling him about the then SCCA alcohol Nazis. He just looked at me, "It's cool. In Puerto Rico we do this all the time!". He went out and qualified a very respectable 4th or 5th.

We started the race behind the green Saab of Road and Track and the nicely turned out RX7 of Car and Driver, red and blue stripes over white. True to form the brakes lasted about an hour and shortly thereafter quit working at all. We drove the remainder of the race without brakes. At one point, late at night, we were black flagged for no brake lights. In the pits, I pushed the pedal down and they came on. The officials asked why they couldn't be seen on the track? Not wanting to get DQ'd for no brakes, I just said we were saving them for the finish. They sent us back out.

About the same time as the brake debacle, we realized that we were completely out of tires, everyone corded. Junk. There was one guy serving as a tire station and I found out that Car and Driver had a stack of Goodyears. As soon as a tire got worn on the inside they would change it. For a \$20 dollar bill he reverse mounted their cast offs onto our wheels. We finished the race on backwards Goodyears!

My folks had driven up from Virginia in their motorhome and Dad threw a BBQ at midnight for the team and crew. Crew: Turns out that Nelson had hosted some 24 hour motorcycle races. Now there's some crazy shit but we snagged a motorcycle team to crew for us. They were incredible; fast, thorough and completely unshakeable. Just killer.

By the time the sun came up the track was in bad shape with big potholes everywhere especially in the carousel. Still we finished 3rd, 5th and 6th. R&T won it in that ugly but solid reliable Saab followed by C&D in their white RX7. Leaving Too Tall to pack everything up and head home, John Casey and I split for the airport. About halfway across country he looked at me and said, "well, what do you think? Want to do it again next year?". I said, "not a snowball's chance". We both just chuckled and ordered another cocktail.

PS. Those 2 black RX&'s from Mazda Comp? They were so used up and beat up that Mazda refused to take them back. John had to buy them from Mazda! Seems that showroom stock isn't always cheap racing!

Mark Welch

Danville, VA