

CAR

A U S T R A L I A

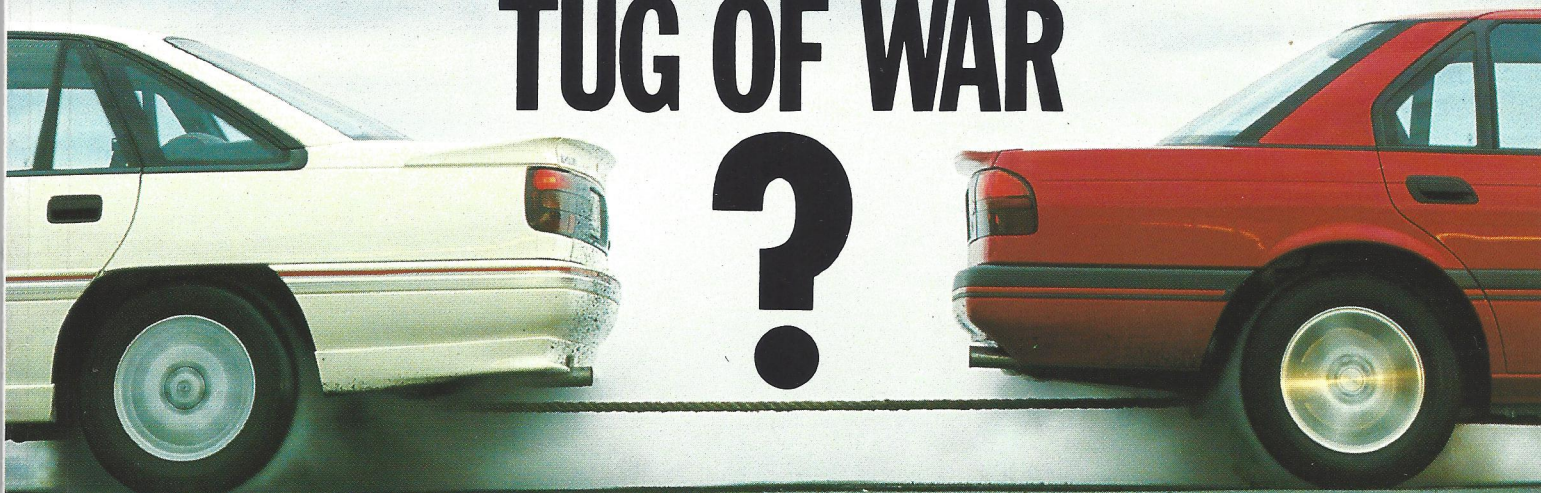
SEPTEMBER
1991
\$4.50
NZ \$6.50 Inc GST

V8 COMMODORE v V8 FALCON

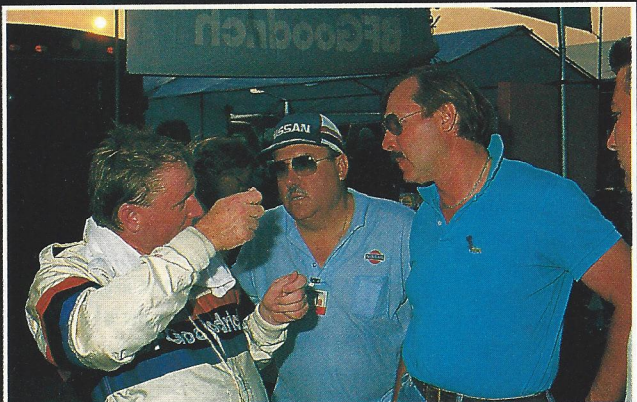


WHO WINS THE PERFORMANCE TUG OF WAR

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*Previewed: Volvo 850, Mazda 323, Mitsubishi Verada V6.
Tested: BMW 320i, Legend vs 929, Paseo vs S Coupe vs Civic.*



- Driving in a
- 24-hour race is a
- special kind of
- automotive
- masochism. When
- the race is called
- The Longest Day
- of Nelson, it only
- gets worse.



Wacky Races

By Paul Gover

This is not a race. This will not be a race until tomorrow morning, at the earliest. This is an endurance drive. "Do not race anybody. If they're faster, pull over and let them by."

"When the sun comes up tomorrow we'll see who's left, what we have to do, then go racing."

The words weren't coming from Tom Walkinshaw, Fred Gibson or Frank Gardner, all past masters of long-distance race team management, but a man who usually makes his living as an electrical distributor in the rolling backwoods country of Ohio, USA.

Mike Puskar is not a big name in the motorsport world and he certainly doesn't rate a mention in the same breath as Walkinshaw, Gibson and Gardner but Puskar — say it 'Push-car' and hope you don't have to do it — knows more than the other three combined about America's

longest, toughest, craziest 24-Hour endurance race.

It's not the SunBank 24 at Daytona Beach, Florida, no matter what you might have heard about the challenge of running Le Mans sports cars at the spiritual home of the crash-and-bash NASCAR pack, but a renegade road race called *The Longest Day of Nelson*.

It's been won by factory cars from Porsche, Chevrolet and Ford and the people who know rate it alongside Le Mans and Daytona as one of the world's classic twice-

around-the-clock survival tests. For America's showroom stock racers it's the ultimate challenge of speed, endurance and skill. Mostly endurance though.

The *Longest Day* is so tough because the course is as rough as most motocross tracks, the 200-plus drivers have the talent of 10, and the cars are a rag-tag collection of crap, classics and current contenders who wouldn't look out of place in the old *Wacky Racers* children's cartoon strip.

It makes the race fast, fun and fraught for a full 24 hours, on an old-fashioned American road course with a 140km/h lap average and the safety facilities and amenities of Le Mans in the '50s. Plenty of the armco railing has been attacked by metal worms, the pitlane looks like the aftermath of a medieval battle, and the toilets are just organ pipes into the ground.

None of this seems to bother the wacky

SPORT

Wacky Races

racers who rendezvous each year in the countryside outside Akron — the birthplace of the American tyre industry and still corporate headquarters for BFGoodrich, Firestone and Goodyear — to add another day to their racing resumes and subtract a day, and more, from the racing lives of their cars.

For 1991, the 12th running of the annual *Longest Day of Nelson*, there were more than 50 entries led by factory or factory-supported cars from Honda, Mazda, Mitsubishi and the uniquely-American Consulier — that's 'con-soo-lear'. Down at the tail there were speedy antiques including 260Zs, hot-rod BMWs and even a Fiat 124 Spider which rapidly became the subject of a "When will it bust?" sweepstakes among rival teams.

The only foreign entrant in the field was an Australian motoring journalist, more conditioned to 15-lap Corolla sprints than a

24-hour enduro, sharing a triple class-winning Nissan 300ZX with two other motor writers and a PR flunky — all four under the command of team manager and car owner Puskar.

That's not how the attack was originally planned, though. The original idea was to assemble an international writing and talking team — CAR editor Paul Gover, former Motor Trend editor Mike Anson and freelance writer Rich Taylor from the USA, with Goodrich's Ed Jacobs — to sing the success of a factory Consulier turbo running on BFGoodrich road tyres.

When the Consulier team defected to Bridgestone, another uniquely American car — an open-topped and open-ended Mustang V8-engined replica of a British '50s roadster, called a Panoz — was substituted.

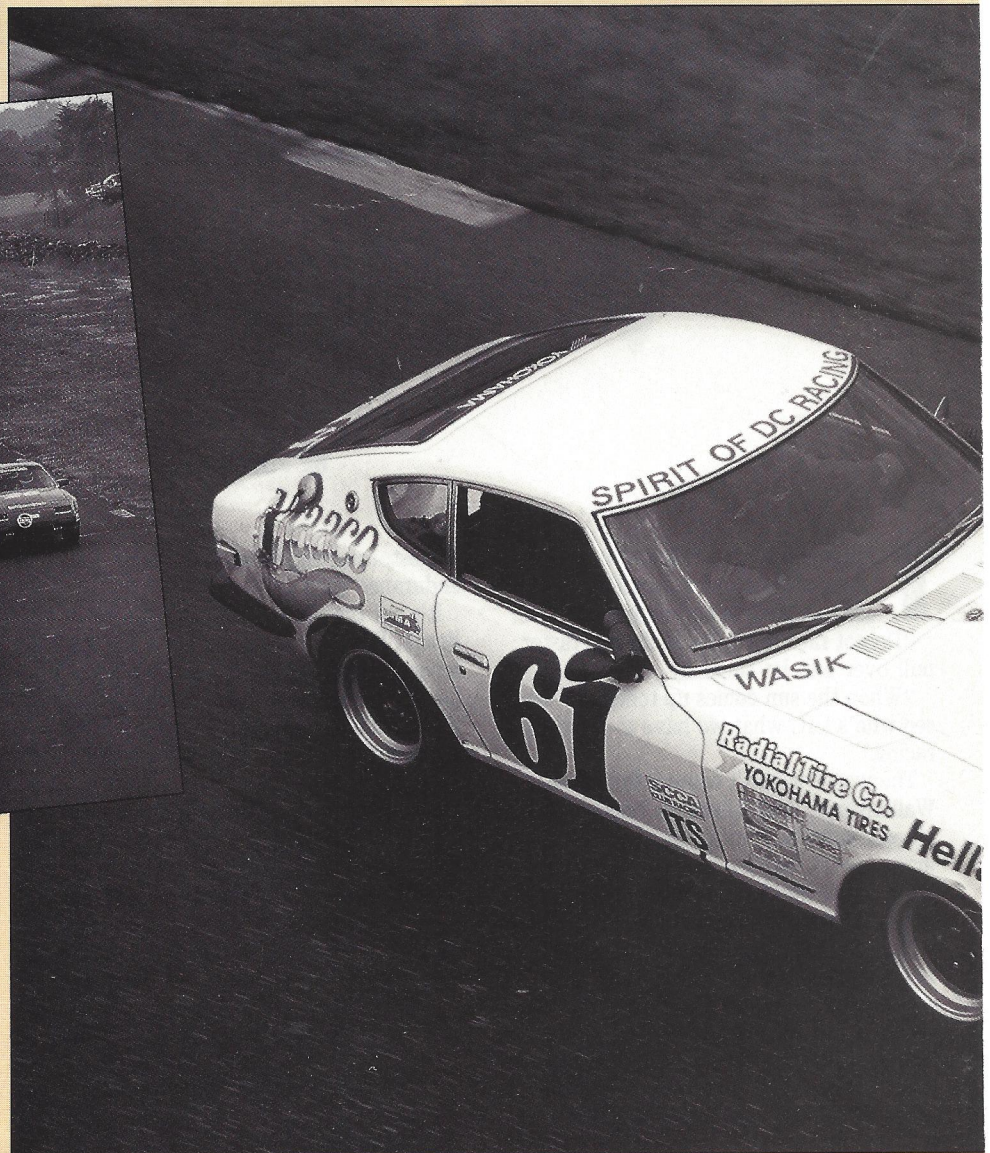
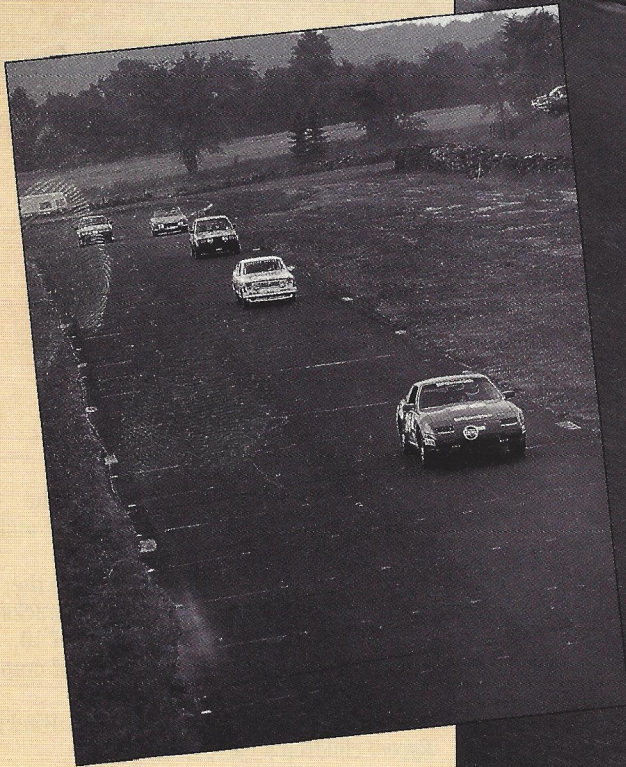
But when time ran out on the Panoz build program it was time to bring in the switch hitter: Puskar's superannuated 300ZX, back from retirement for a shot at its fourth consecutive victory in Showroom Stock Class A.

Qualifying 27th in a rag-tag field of 48 seems shabby, especially as former *Longest Day* champion Taylor was at the wheel, but it was all part of Puskar's plan to beat the wacky racers at their own game.

"Let's keep the laps down and go easy on the car. Qualifying doesn't mean anything, anyway," he said.

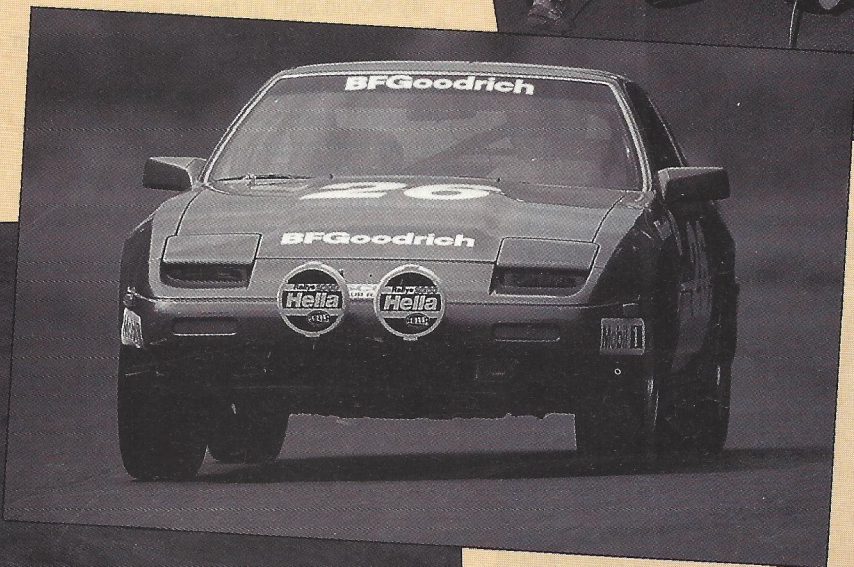
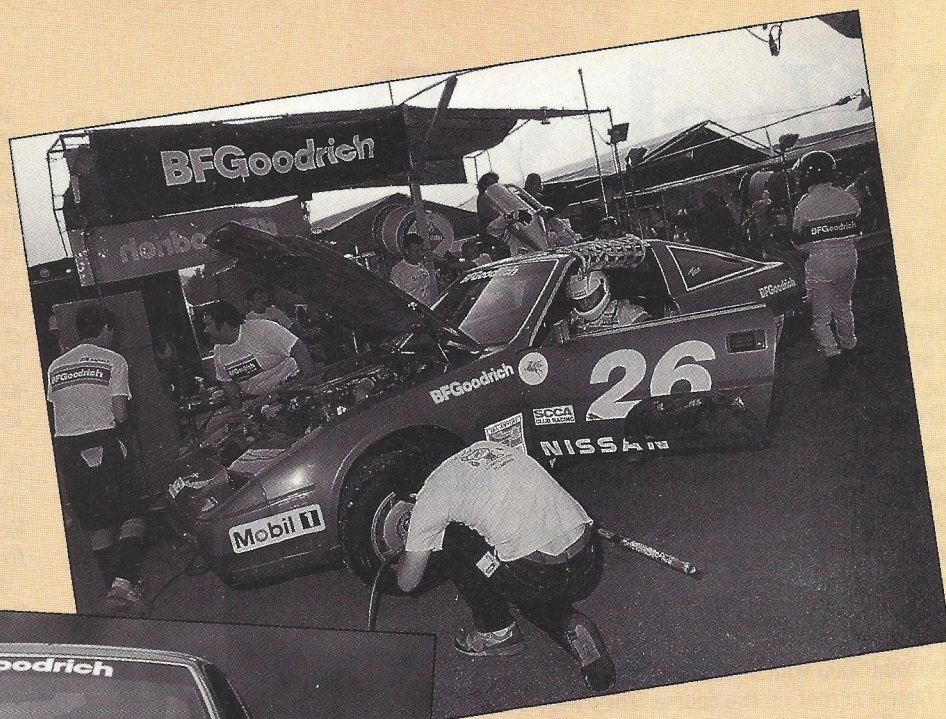
It did to some of the others, although for different reasons.

For the Le Mans-lookalike Consuliers and their all-pro driving squad it was a chance to run much quicker than they would ever be allowed in the race. As a special concession to a PR coup all-Consulier front row, the wooden blocks under the accelerator pedals — yes, seriously — were removed to allow the 2.2-litre Dodge turbo engines to switch from tortoise racers to qualifying hares.

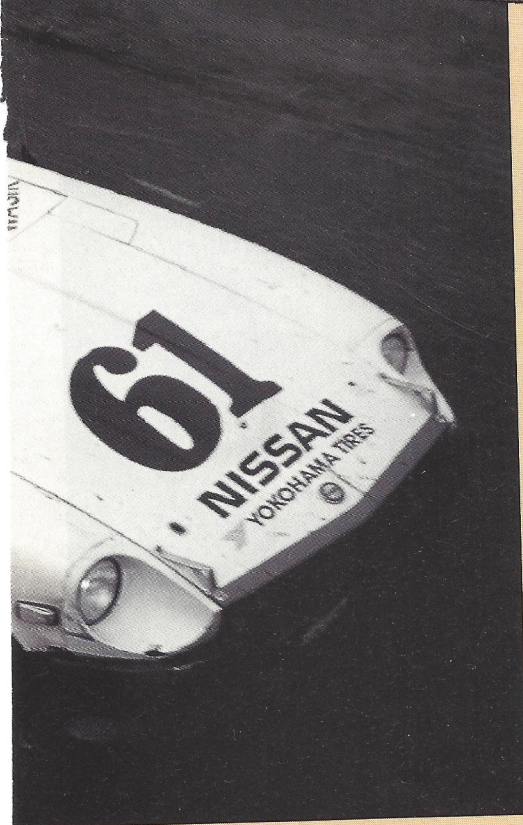


SPORT

"Not that upside down across the outfield is mentioned in the local guide book."



A variety of Nissan's Z-cars ran at Nelson.



For others, including a motley Datsun 240Z and a shiny new factory Mitsubishi Eclipse, qualifying was a chance to get a unique view of the Nelson Ledges' countryside. Not that upside down across the outfield is mentioned in the local guide book.

"Well, they won practice," was Puskar's verdict on both camps.

For a Nelson novice, even one fresh from the hotbed of Australia's production car championship, practice was an instant jet-lag cure. It's a very fast track with zero error margin, especially with the rest of the wacky racers sharing the road.

It's also much rougher than any Australian course, apart from Oran Park the weekend after a truck race meeting, complete with stutter bumps through two of the quickest corners. In the ZX, a non-

turbo V6, only third and fourth gears got a run; perhaps with a quick flick to second for the tight corner onto the pit straight if Puskar was looking the other way.

The track is lined with thousands and thousands of old tyres, to cushion the inevitable blows and save wear and tear on the armco, and they're a big bonus for the local mosquito population. Old water-filled BFGs are an ideal incubator, and the organisers had to resort to industrial-strength spraying before the race to keep the critters under control.

The rest of the Nelson package was a curious combination of amateur and professional, contrasting sharply with Australian-style showroom stock standards. At the top end there were the factory teams from Mitsubishi, Mazda and Honda and a host of major-league tyre companies, and at the other extreme there are the silly old cars and a ban on tyres such as the Dunlop Formula R which set the pace Downunder.

BFG had cleared the warehouse of its very last Comp T/A R1 tyres, expecting the wacky racers to cut a swathe through the rubber, although the 300ZX was scheduled for left-front rubber at every stop and an occasional freshen at the other corners.

Even before the start there were plenty of teams with plenty of problems. But nothing quite like the BMW which looked a bit low in the rear on the starting grid, and was discovered to be hiding a floor jack and spare differential in the boot.

From the start, as the Consuliers and the 32-valve CRX — yes, that's right, eight valves for each cylinder — fought for glory, the old glory Nissan began a steady climb through the hopefuls and the doubtfuls. Perhaps it was the unintentional

Wacky Races

lightweighting, as a Hella driving light vibrated off the nose, but Taylor was soon up by more than 10 places on his starting spot.

Then came the controlled chaos of the first pit stop, with the rookie aussie strapped in at the deep end for a first three-hour stint.

From behind the wheel, peeking out from behind the rollcage, it looked unlikely that any of the wacky racers would survive the carnage of Nelson Ledges. Especially not the Mazda RX7 and the shiny new Mitsubishi 3000 which went wheels-up at the fastest corner on the course. They were eventually sucked out of the tyre wall by a giant 'wrecker', which brought back memories of the early days at Bathurst as it lumbered onto the course — blocking apexes day and night — to rescue the dead and wounded.

"From lap one the 300ZX was sliding, jumping and skating..."

From lap one the 300ZX was sliding, jumping and skating, but even a belt in the back from a Nissan and a door-buffing job by a bellowing Mustang didn't get any sympathy from Puskar.

When you're racing, the radio is your lifeline, so imagine your reaction when the first few conversations with the pit manager go something like this:

Driver: "Somebody just ran into the back of me. What's the damage?"

Pit: "Oh, about \$700."

Driver: "Boy, this thing is handling real strange."

Pit: "Stop whining. Drive the car."

Driver: "I got another dent in the door, but I promise I didn't hit anyone."

Pit: "Oh, yeah. Racers are like fishermen — they all tell lies."

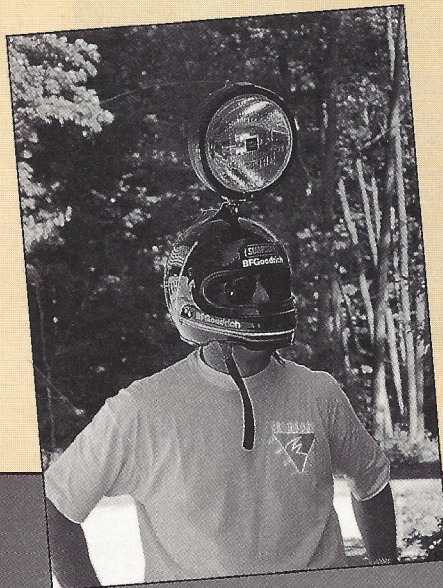
Driver: "One of the driving lamps is falling off. What do I do?"

Pit: "Stop complaining. Just drive the car."

Driver: "Well, they black flagged me."

Pit: "Pretend you didn't see it."

Eventually even Puskar conceded that the errant second Hella needed attention, and a vicious attach with tin snips was combined with another driver change and refuel.



Rattling into the darkness the pitstops and driver rotation continued on schedule, with the Goodrich tyre changers working overtime to supply fresh rubber and the motorhomes offering air-conditioned refuge from the driver's seat and the 35-plus heat and 80-plus humidity.

But *The Longest Day* isn't quite like the professional efficiency of Le Mans, and one crew member arrived at the track tuned up by three brake jobs and a second-job shift as a disco bouncer to wield the refuelling churn.

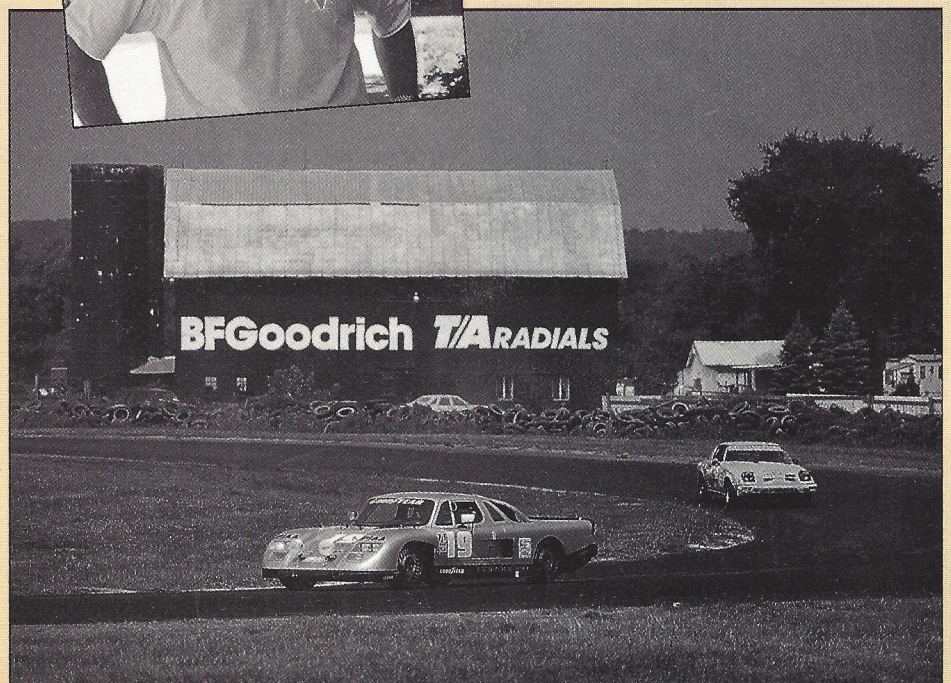
Heading for midnight the 300ZX was up to fifth overall with an 11-lap buffer over the next-best class contender, a Mitsubishi Eclipse trailing like a hyena on the scent of fresh meat.

My second shift in the hot seat came at 3am, with the nobbled Nissan now down to a single headlamp but still running briskly in a field which was mostly gut-shot and stumbling. Even the Consuliers were limping with broken subframes, and the hot-shot CRXs which had dogged them to their demise were also faltering with suspension and engine troubles.

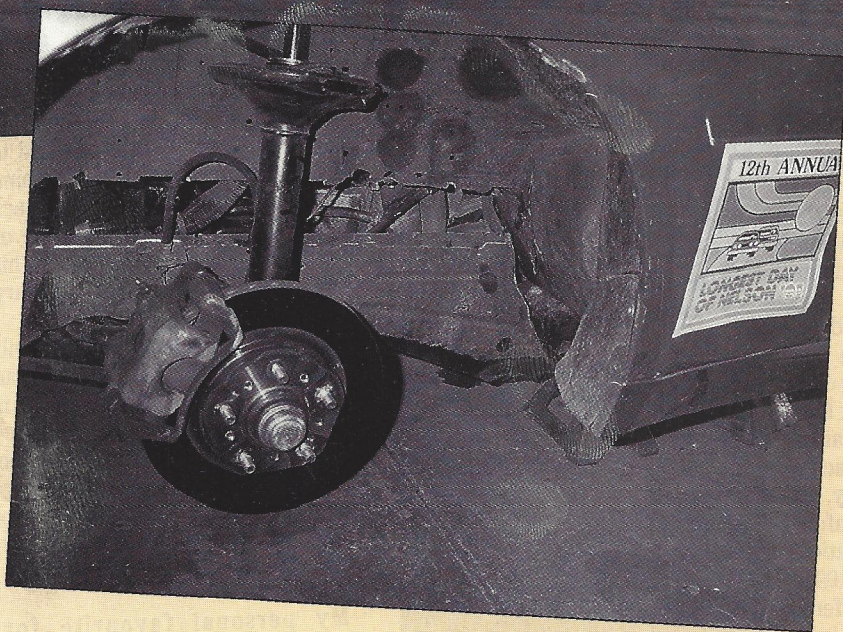
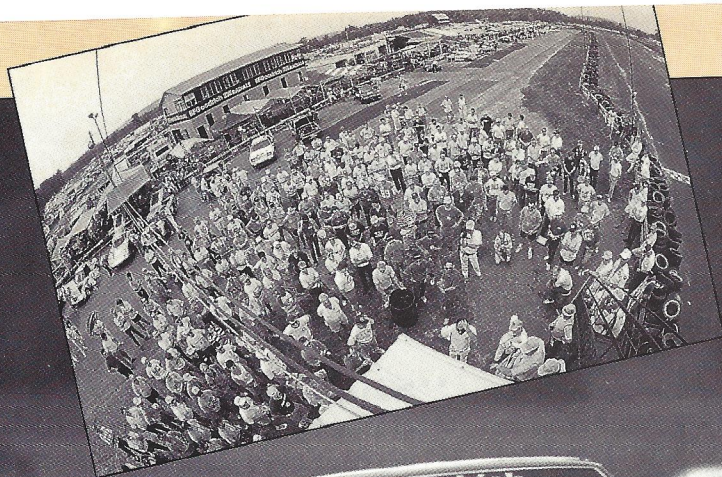
All of this would eventually hand victory, against the odds, to a very old but very quick Datsun 260Z which was flogged from start to finish.

The newer but rapidly ageing 300ZX, without lights and with suspension which

Team manager Mike Puskar had a unique solution to missing driving lights.



SPORT



flopped and banged, was becoming a real handful but with Puskar prowling the pits — you've seen Frank Gardner on a bad day? — there was no question of slacking or whining. Instead it was time to put the head down, fight the night, and keep the lurking Mitsubishi at bay.

Even when the power steering quit entering the flat-in-fourth kink at the back of the circuit — proving that Murphy's Law is international — there was no question of an early shower. Just a chance for an unplanned workout.

And, besides, there was always something interesting going on. Like the 'wrecker'

towing a Consulier back to the pits and passing one of the backmarkers; a spinning CRX which raised more dust than a rally champion as it spun through a duelling pack, miraculously without hitting anything; and a yellow-flag period for a 'road kill' on the front straight, because the marshalls didn't have a dead possum flag.

At 6am it was time to pass the baton again, this time to Formula Ford refugee Anson, then skulk back to the motorhome to recover for the final scheduled leg to the flag at 3.30pm.

At least, that was the plan. But the car

had other ideas, and a scheduled stop became a non-scheduled retirement at 8am when the crew dived beneath the ZX to top-up the power steering and found something much more terminal.

After its three previous 24-hour victories, the ZX had succumbed to terminal metal fatigue. The spot welds in the front of the car had been pulling apart from the green flag, and eventually the left-front chassis rail split from the firewall to leave a gaping hole and truly independent front suspension.

The engine was the only thing left holding the bumper to the cabin, which explained the quirkily handling. But it also meant parking the car before anyone else got hurt.

The official results show that the car was retired after 17 hours and 609 laps, still in fifth place overall and still leading its class. It had seen the sunrise, but it had also been the sunset for its racing career.

With the car back in the transporter, and an in-depth investigation of the damage underway, team manager Puskar was left in the pits clutching the final pages of his 24-hour master plan.

According to that plan, with the sun rising rapidly over the green-capped Ohio hillside and the final contenders now clearly established, we were just getting ready to go racing.