



THE LONGEST DAY

*How we survived it
to win the world's first showroom stock 24-hour enduro*

BY JOE RUSZ



PHOTOS BY BOB FISCHER



Joe Rusz (left) and John Dinkel.

IN YOUR WALTER Mitty world, have you ever won the 24 Hours of Le Mans? In, say, a factory Porsche or Renault turbo that ran so well you not only beat the opposition, but even lapped them? Later, as you savored victory, did they spray you with Moët et Chandon which you managed to gulp when a jeroboom of the stuff was passed around? If the answers are yes, yes and yes, then you've probably sat through too many screenings of Steve McQueen's *Le Mans*. But not to worry. So did I. And each year when the race results were published, I was disappointed that it wasn't my name that was misspelled. Ordinarily, this is where my fantasy ends. But the Lord and Bill Fishburne move in mysterious ways and (zap!), here I am at the finish line swigging Moët and being sprayed with the domestic variety (waste not, want not). We have just won the 24 Hours (of Nelson Ledges). In a Turbo (Saab). And beat the other "factory" team (*Car and Driver*). Walter Mitty lives.

Reality this day is pit row at Nelson Ledges Road Course in Garrettsville, Ohio, a 2.0-mile circuit that hosts more SCCA regional and national races than you can shake a GCR at. The Ledges is the sort of grass-roots circuit that many of us grew up with, then promptly forgot. It's no Le Mans, but to most of the survivors of *The Longest Day*, it doesn't really matter. They have just made motor racing history by competing in the world's first 24-hour Showroom Stock race. The enduro part was Fred Koslasky's idea. Fred is General Manager of Nelson Ledges which already has a successful 24-hour motorcycle race. So successful that the track has to turn down entries. Not the case where the 4-wheel version of the contest is concerned. Although 50 or more entries were expected, only 21 showed up. Next year, things may be different. Because when the idea of an everyman's enduro catches on, entrants may have to participate in a qualifying race in order to compete in *The Longest Day*, so called because it began on June 21, the longest day of the year.

That was yesterday when at 4:00 p.m. the green flag fell on a mixed bag of sedans and sports cars, representing 10 manufacturers. There were a brace of Porsche 924s, a quartet of Mazda RX-7s, a handful of Sciroccos and Rabbits, numerous Ford products, plus a Triumph TR7, Alfa Romeo Spider, AMC Gremlin, Toyota Corolla and (of all things) a Peugeot 604. Oh, yes, and our Saab 900 Turbo which normally serves as Fishburne's Showroom Stock A race car. As I said before, it was the Fish who put the men, the machine and the money together and invited *Road & Track* (Editor John Dinkel and myself) along for the ride, or in

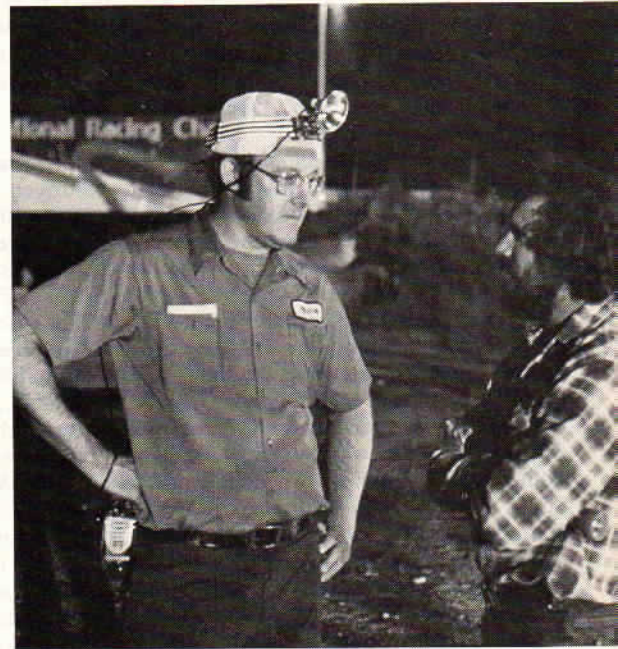
this case, a drive. And what a drive it was!

For starters, there was Bill's green Saab Turbo painstakingly prepared by David Wolfe. Wolfe spent 100 hours making the Saab right and if you're wondering why anyone would devote that much time to a "stock" car, then you don't understand Showroom Stock racing. Sure, all SS cars are equal. But some are more equal than others. Actually, the Saab was probably less equal because in addition to the requisite safety equipment and the quartz halogen driving lights permitted, along with any comparable aftermarket shock absorbers and optional seats (Gabriel and Recaro in our case), the Turbo was fitted with a Panasonic color TV camera. Fishburne had arranged for local television coverage with Fred Griffith of WEWS-TV. Fred wanted Cleveland area viewers to share in this unique experience—a talk show personality riding as a passenger in a racing sedan. I didn't see the show, but I'm told that when Fred exited the car after his 2-hour stint with the Fish, his complexion matched the car's color.

Besides the car there was ace IMSA car builder and crew chief, Preston Miller, who served as the catalyst that made our effort function flawlessly throughout the weekend. The truth is that this race was won in the pits and that's where Preston and right-hand man Shaylor Duncan (another IMSA and Can-Am regular), plus David Wolfe, Chas Conklin and Bob Jack simply outshone all other crews. A typical stop to add approximately 13 gal. of fuel, swap the left front tire and change drivers, was executed in about 1 minute and 30 seconds. Even with a complete tire change plus front brake pad replacement, we never tarried longer than 2:30.0.

Finally, there were the drivers: Fishburne, a Runoffs regular, and Don Knowles, 2-time SSB national champion. When the going got tough—about the time that everyone figured out that a Showroom Stock car could be driven flat-out for 24 hours—these two very tough drivers got going. Shortly after the halfway mark, both men turned laps quicker than the 1:29.5 qualifying time that pegged the Saab as the 4th fastest of the field. In those early morning hours when the Ohio air was cool and damp (the way turbo engines like it), Bill and Don got the Saab into the low 27s. What's more, Fishburne and Knowles drove our stints as well as their own, fighting fatigue and heat later in the day.

Which was not the way we planned it, at least in the beginning. Earlier in the week, Bill, Don, John and I had discussed strategy—save the car and survive. To do so, we would turn 1:40.0 laps which meant using mostly 4th gear and a rev limit of 5000 rpm. I tried that the first day out and, believe me, it was hard to go



Preston Miller (left) and Shaylor Duncan.



that slowly. After qualifying and some practice sessions, it became obvious that even a 1:35.0 was too slow. So we settled for 32s and 33s, about as fast as some of us (ahem) could go within our prescribed limits. Except that by daybreak, the limits went out the window as Fishburne and Knowles used 2nd, 3rd and 4th plus a 5500-rpm rev limit in an attempt to stay ahead of the Mazdas and the surviving Porsche.

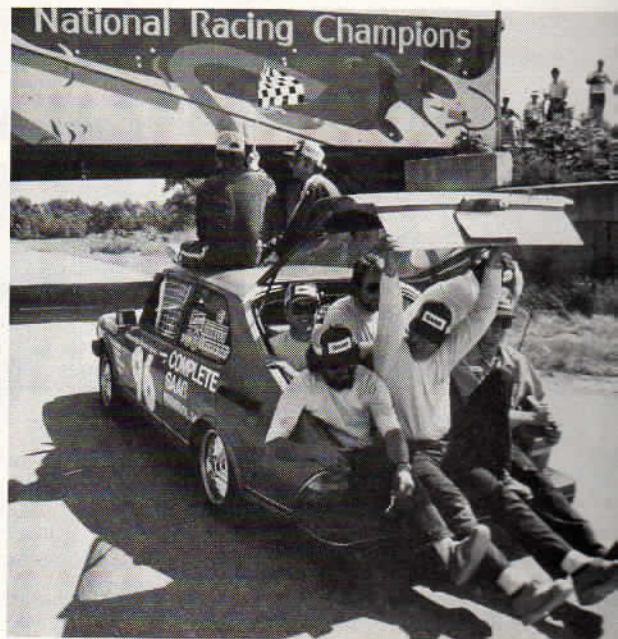
Along with our conservative driving technique, we also scrapped our rotation schedule. The original plan called for each of us to spend two hours in the car and six hours resting, with Bill (and Fred Griffith) starting. I would follow, then Knowles and Dinkel. But the track officials caused us to change our schedule when they decreed that each driver put in at least one hour before nightfall. Knowles and I each gave up an hour and it wasn't until after Dinkel's stint that things were back in synch. At least until my midnight ride. Whistling along through the darkness, I managed to complete a relatively uneventful first hour. I'd passed a bunch of cars and was feeling quite smug when I missed an apex and collected a tire wall. Luckily, it was at turn 13, the slowest corner on the track. But even at 30 mph, the impact was enough to knock loose one of our Marchal driving lights. I motored on for another lap or so, about as long as it took our crew to figure out that all was not well with the Saab. They called me in, snipped off the light which was dangling by its wires, and sent in Knowles. I did a lot of cursing and a little sleeping and by daybreak I was ready for another go. But a fun race had become serious business as Bill and Don, given a brief respite by John, settled down to winning.

That meant keeping *Car and Driver's* very fast Mazda in check and making sure that the 3rd-place Porsche, co-driven by *Motor Trend* staffer Peter Frey, didn't start to make up the 20-plus lap deficit it had incurred because of mechanical problems. The Porsche was being handled by a number of Runoffs' regulars headed by D. J. Fazekas, 2-time SSA national champ. Fuzzy and the Porsche were quicker than we were, but 20 laps? We felt that barring complications, the Porsche couldn't win. Besides, we needn't have worried, because the 924 was disqualified for a technical infraction after finishing 3rd. But the Mazda, now that was different. Prepped by the C and D staff who also shared the driving, the RX-7 was catching us at about .05 sec a lap. No slouches, those fellows, who included Pat Bedard, an IMSA and SCCA veteran; Rich Ceppos, no Runoffs' stranger; Don Sherman, Bonneville veteran; and Larry Griffin who, like some of us, had to start somewhere. To be honest, the Mazda could have won except for one thing—it could go only half as far on a tank of gasoline as our Saab. Call it the RX-7's Achilles Heel, a fuel pickup that starts to starve shortly after the halfway mark on the gauge. Without fuel, the Mazda's engine would die in Nelson

Ledges' mostly right-hand turns, leaving the driver with choice but to pit. And pit they did, probably twice as many as we did. All I can say is that the Saab would run down to a gallon and never leave us powerless in a turn. It made planned pit stops, plus one unscheduled stop to tape the driving lights and another to check damage.

Sometime during the night the Pinto of Dave Rush/Tolbert/Robert Cannon went off course and out of the race was followed by the John Baldwin/Allen Michelet Mustang, which flipped in a rather spectacular manner. It was followed a few laps later by a Fiesta whose withdrawal symptoms reduced the Ford effort to a single Pinto which soldiered on to finish. Ironically, Ford, under the direction of Walter Hayes, had had a much better showing and had erected a large tent to shelter the FoMoCo entries. It went unused, save for a spot occupied by a road car.

Legitimate mechanical ills (as opposed to crashes) claimed only four entries, remarkable news considering the grueling nature of The Longest Day. There were cars competing in each of the three Showroom Stock categories (A, B and C) and in most cases each ran right at or below its respective class track record. Certainly this can be said for the Tom Schneider/Joe Ne



maker Rabbit which finished 4th overall, sandwiched between two pairs of Mazda RX-7s.

The 10th place earned by Russ Strate/Bruce Marbitto/George Shafer was not what one would call headline material. Unless you've driven a 4-door sedan such as a Peugeot. This palace on wheels weighed 3400 lb, yet it managed to circulate in the 1:36.0 range. Peugeot pundits reported it was the first time in history that a 604 had been used for racing. Even so, the car averaged 9.8 mpg during its 1680-mile journey.

Our Saab, on the other hand, averaged 9.5 mpg during its 1850-mile odyssey. The Turbo also used 27 Bob Vilven-prepared

Pirelli P6 tires, 14 left fronts, seven right fronts and three right and left rears. We changed the front brake pads four times and the rears once. Somewhere during the course of The Long Day, the drivers, the crew and its helpers, plus the timers, scorers, consumed \$175 worth of food and drink prepared and dispensed by Bill Fishburne's new wife Barbara (who spent her honeymoon at the Ledges) and by Dave Wolfe's girlfriend Debbie Perdue. That \$175 didn't include the Moët et Chandon which Fish brought with him from Chicago. Prepared to bet? You bet we were. But then, could a Walter Mitty dream-come-true be any different?

TRIBUTE TO THE TEAM



David Wolfe.

DAVID WOLFE is a guy who could teach the Swedes a thing or two about building Saabs. David owns the heaviest toolbox I've ever attempted to lift and some of the tools contained therein are the largest I've seen this side of a Mack truck repair center. Tall, lean and lanky, David handles all those tools with a surgeon's touch except for his 2-fisted rubber hammer. David spent 100 hours prepping Fishburne's 900 Turbo for the 24-hour race, primarily checking everything at least twice and squirting Loctite on anything that moved.

Preston Miller is a big man and has been known to say, "Ah never trust anybody who don't make noise when he eats." Preston is so big that every time he stretched his 6-ft 4-in., 240-lb frame to its considerable limits, I had the feeling an eclipse (solar or lunar, depending on the time) was occurring. Constant followers of the IMSA RS series will remember Preston as the Miller half of the Miller-Norburn BMWs campaigned so successfully by Nick Craw. An expert mechanic and a talented engine and car builder, Preston acted as crew chief during this race, a role he performed perfectly. Preston planned for every conceivable and some inconceivable contingencies.

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Things like laying plywood in our pit area to facilitate jacking up and working underneath the car. And quick release valves on our refueling cans. A big-hearted Southern boy, Preston's way with people molded several individuals into an unbeatable pit crew. Being a Northerner, I couldn't understand half of what Preston was saying, but if that's what it takes to win races, ah'm signing up for diction lessons.

Don Knowles is one laid-back individual. Laid-back until it comes time to buckle into a race car. Then, as Don describes it, the "Red Mist" descends and the tiger within takes over. Don's droll Southern humor resulted in the "Hi, I'm Bill Fishburne's wife, teammate (pick one)" T-shirts worn by the team all weekend. Don spends his working hours as a program analyst for the U.S. Department of Agriculture and his non-racing nights defending his role as a bureaucrat. I'd guess Don's response to the question, "What did you do while you were out there racing at night?" was appropriate for a bean counter at the Department of Pork and Poultry: "I talked to the trees."

Willard B Fishburne (left) and Don Knowles.



Preston Miller.

Willard B. "Bill" Fishburne is a man, an organizer and (when he wasn't driving hell of a race) master of the overstatement. At one point Bill was overhyped saying to no one in particular, "I have a premonition Saturday night around 11 a.m. that if we finished 1st, we'd win. Right, Bill!"—John Dinkel