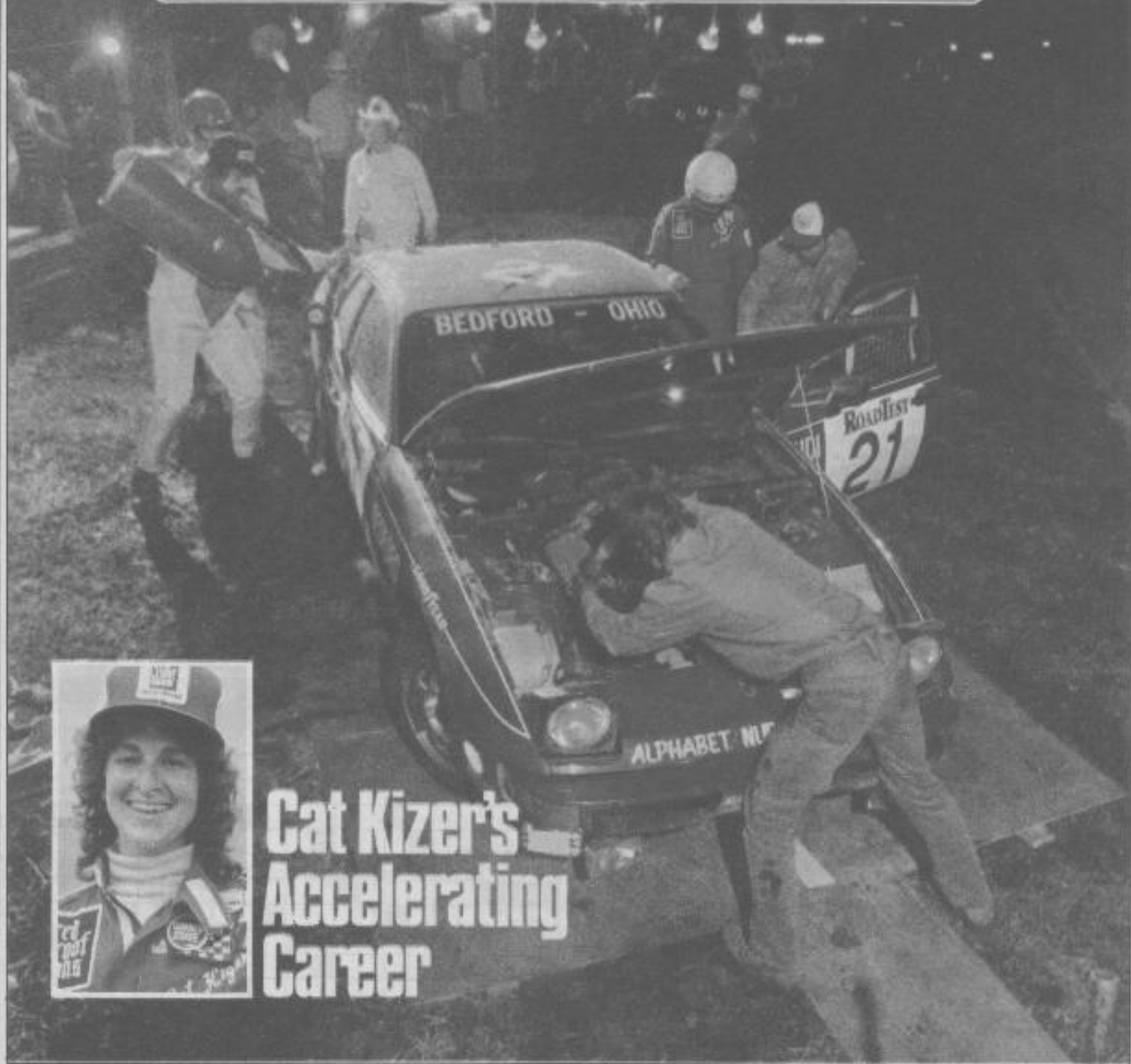


# BEACON

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## Cat Kizer's Accelerating Career



# Wife In The Fast Lane

*Or, how to adjust a contact lens at 115 mph*

**by Rich Henson**  
**photos by Lew Stamp**

**C**atherine "Cat" Kizer got something out of her marriage that very few women do: She got to be a professional race car driver.

But she didn't stop there. She got something out of racing that few racers ever do: She got to be the *creme de la creme*, one of the best in the country. And though she neither grew up with the notion of becoming a racer, nor liked the idea when her husband David pressed it on her seven years ago, she isn't complaining now.

"I never really planned it this way," says the 5-foot-4 saleswoman from West Akron, who turns into a weekend wild rider. "It took a lot of talking."

Her husband—an engineer by trade, and also at heart—was, at least in Cat's eyes, spending too much money building cars and not enough feathering the family nest.

While Cat dreamed of fixing up the house, David sat up in bed at night calculating the optimum bore capacity of a cast-iron

cylinder wall, given the allowed displacement ratios and, of course, taking into account the heat value of the valves and the thrust capabilities of the crankshaft.

In his pensive mode, David often entertained such ideas, but he knew full well that a rift was imminent between the two.

Cat felt like the odd-man-out: "I couldn't buy my antiques and stuff," she remembers. "I was afraid we'd have to sell the house to buy a good engine."

Finally, in 1974, six years after their marriage in Dallas, David shifted into his persuasion mode. He convinced Cat it was time she went to driving school.

It wasn't just that David needed a driver he could trust for his race cars: He did a lot of his own driving. He wanted the two of them to share in the thrill of his second love—cars that go faster than anybody else's.

"She went to school at my insistence," David says in a mild voice that sounds neither demanding nor urgent, "because she kept bitching about the money going into the race car. I thought it would be a good idea if we teamed up."

Like everything else David fiddles with, the scheme worked.

They readily admit that their

mutual admiration of a fine running machine has brought them closer. They're *Two For The Road* now, as their business card verifies, and together they've formed one of the most successful husband-wife racing units in the country.

**T**heir most recent success came last month, when Cat raced with a four-member Porsche-Audi team from Bedford in a 24-hour endurance event at Nelson-Kennedy Ledges, in the northeast corner of Portage County.

It's one of only two day-long races in the country, the other being Florida's "24 Hours at Daytona."

Even an afternoon at the Ledges is something a driver doesn't forget. A whole day is one stiff challenge—but Cat handled it admirably.

Fans had packed the Ledges that day with tents, campers, trucks and cars loaded with sandwiches and soft drinks and beer. The infield and vast parking lots had become a proving ground for potential racers.

Many said they'd rather be "out there" where the action was. But others said they were content just to watch.

The smell of motor oil and burning tires assaulted the nostrils. But the dominant feeling was one of movement—people meandering and milling about the infield, talking valves and fuel consumption and gossip from home and "Hey, I haven't seen you in awhile."

Driving with Cat were racers Fred Baker, Gary Witzenberg and Bob Nickel. Each would drive a two-hour "split" and then turn the car over to the next teammate.

With each passing hour, a toll would be taken on the car. But an even tougher toll would be taken on the drivers—because the track is a twisting, turning course of almost two miles per lap, during which the driver enjoys only about 30 seconds of straight-away road.

The anticipation of the ever-present next turn—as well as the



*All wound up after two hours on the track at Nelson-Kennedy Ledges, Akron's "Cat" Kizer recounts the twists and turns of the race.*

fine—no knocks, no sputters, real good. Some clown over here on the right is trying to use me to keep him on the track. Maybe we should try and adjust the lights. Brake pedal sometimes feels a little stiff." And so on, a constant flow of motion, all to keep in tune.

What the pit didn't know, and Cat had no intention of telling them, was that one of her contact lenses had slipped down to the corner of her eye. She couldn't see particularly well.

The right stuff went into effect, and it was automatic. She handled it, and nobody ever found out.

**B**ut later, she let the cat out of the bag: "The contact had slipped to the corner of my eye as I was driving down the straight. I didn't want to tell them. I just said, 'OK, guys, I'm coming in for a second.' They didn't know why. They just panicked."

But Cat was able to reposition the lens over her pupil, and never did make the pit stop.

Meantime, husband David was busy making up signs to keep Cat informed about what the crew knew and she didn't. She was to read them in the fleeting moment that she passed the pit.

David, Cat would say later, didn't just make up two or three-word notes, but full memoranda, complete with footnotes and credit lines.

"He writes me these memos, like, I can't read 'em. It takes me two or three laps just to get through the first sentence."

David goes into his defensive-explanatory mode and replies:

"It doesn't always matter how good of a driver you are, you're not going to go anywhere without a good car. It's the car and the driver..."

Then Cat nods her assent. They both realize the importance of what each other does. Cat, still smiling over the idea of having to read three-paragraph "notes" while she's "out there" hanging her tail over the edge of a curve,

poignant realization that two dozen other cars are out there with you, screeching and wheeling and peeling their way in front and behind and on either side of you at speeds up to 115 mph—keeps the nerves sharply tuned.

Surrounding the crowd, circling their temporary stomping grounds, were 24 stock cars—cars straight from the factory with little or no modification—swerving and screeching and flying.

**C**at Kizer was stretched out on a reclining chair. She had just finished one of her two-hour splits around the track, and she was attempting to regain her composure by letting everything slow down "just a little bit."

"The speed doesn't really bother you," she said. "It doesn't

really enter into the whole thing. Speed is relative when everybody else is going the same speed. You're in the car and you test the brakes, and as long as the sucker stops, all you think about is how to go as fast as you can and keep the car on the road."

Cat did quite a job of that, averaging roughly a minute and 30 seconds per 1.9-mile lap, or nearly 80 mph. Considering that two-thirds of the time she was going into a turn, or inside a turn, or coming out of a turn, some of which backed a car all the way down to 35 mph, she was handling the race like the pro she's become.

And so did the pit crew—which, during one service stop, accomplished the following in 11 minutes: changed the brakes and tires, replaced some of the wheel bearings, adjusted the carburetor and filled the gas tank.

Cat proved she had the right stuff and was capable of handling it. She became a human gyroscope that whizzed constantly, mixing knowledge and ability and reflexes into a single response mode that never botched it.

The gyroscope was resting now, as it should, for it would have to perform at least two more times before the day was done.

Their car, a Porsche 924, was in the number one spot, as it would be for most of the race. Cat was coolly confident that her next two splits would be just as smooth as the first. To her, there was no other way to look at it.

On her second split, taking control about 1 a.m. that Sunday, everything seemed to be going well.

"Yeah," she told the crew over the CB radio, which keeps her in communication with the pit, "the engine's running just



*Race cars circled the track for 24 hours at Nelson-Kennedy Ledges while spectators filled the infield, guzzling soft drinks and beer.*