

PANORAMA

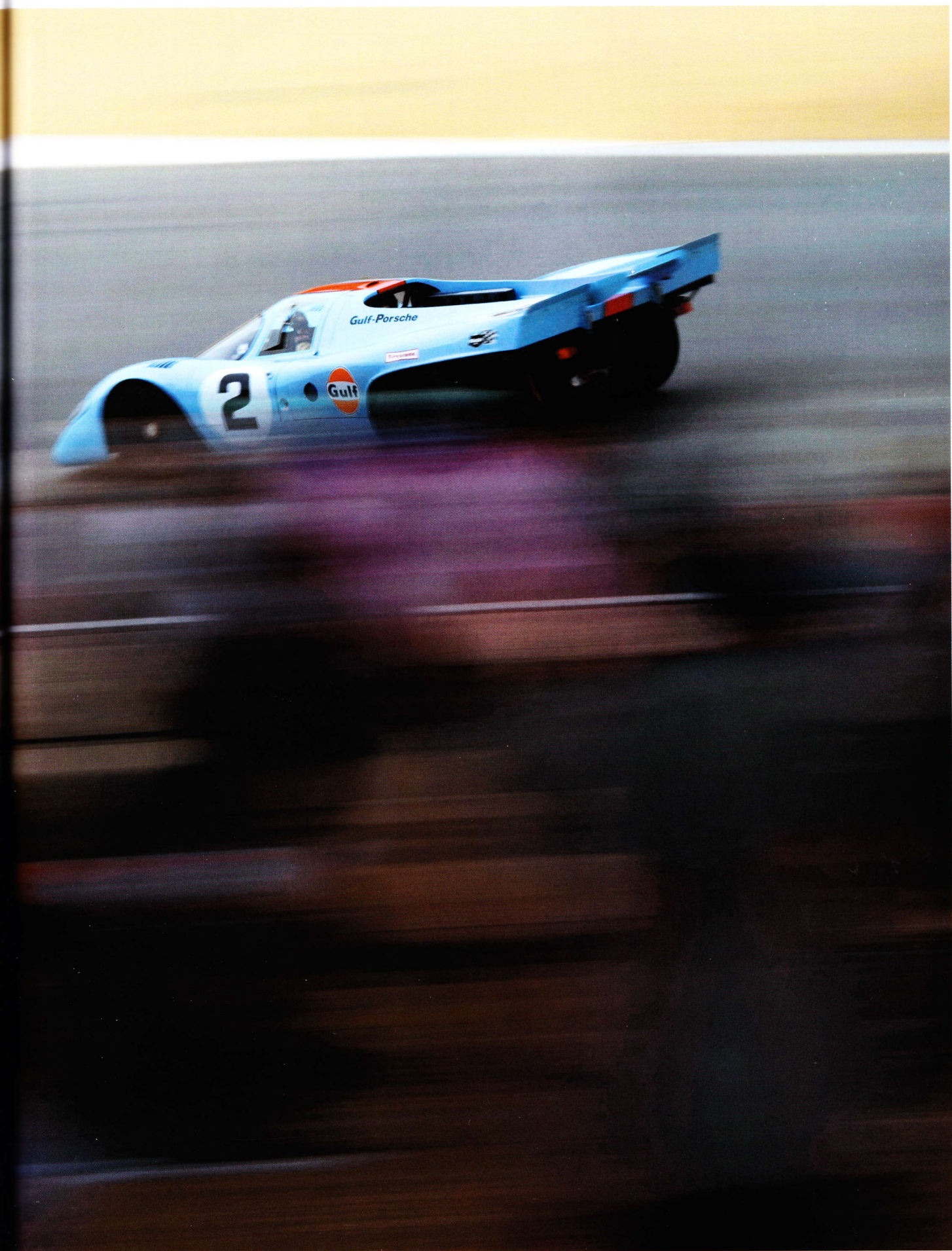
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RRV

PORSCHE CELEBRATES ITS RACING HISTORY WITH 57,531 OF ITS CLOSEST FRIENDS

STORY BY **PRESTON LERNER** PHOTOS BY **MARC URBANO, WES DUENKEL, BRUCE SWEETMAN, BOB CHAPMAN, MICHAEL ALAN ROSS, GUY SPANGENBERG, RANDY WELLS, JOHN LAMM, AND RICHARD BARON**





Finding insanely passionate Porsche racing fans at Rennsport Reunion V is about as challenging as spotting bearded hipsters in Brooklyn. Still, I'm shooting fish in the proverbial barrel when I stop a guy pulling a blue-and-orange shop wagon rolling on go-kart tires and signed by, among other Porsche legends, Alwin Springer, Derek Bell, and Hurley Haywood.

"Why'd you paint it in Gulf colors?" I ask him.

Dave Kealoha beams. "Who doesn't like the Gulf colors?" he says.

"He's crazy about Porsches," clarifies his friend, Kenny Kim.

Kim, I discover, is no slouch in the crazed Porscheophile department, either. "This is just mind-blowing," he says of Rennsport. "Imagine you're a crack addict, and then you walk into a *warehouse* full of crack." He looks around a gargantuan tent filled with a larger and more comprehensive collection of historic Porsche race cars than you could find anywhere other than a parallel universe where Weissach was the center of civilization.

"If you're a Porsche guy, this is Mecca," he says. "It's going to take me a week to process everything I've seen here."

RENNSPORT REUNION V, staged this year at Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca, is the latest edition of the quadrennial orgy of Porsche motorsports awesomeness that began back in 2001 at Lime Rock Park. The event features huge static displays of important race cars, epic autograph sessions, enough Porsche paraphernalia to fill a container ship, and three days of vintage racing in the rolling hills of the Monterey Peninsula. It's held every three or four years because, one presumes, a higher frequency would cause the heads of Porsche fanatics to explode from overstimulation, which would not only lead to costly litigation but would also mar the cars.

Begun as the dream of the late Porsche PR man Bob Carlson, Rennsport Reunion is hosted by Porsche Cars North America and backed by Porsche AG. There are so many people roaming the paddock in snappy-looking corporate gear that I'm convinced the offices in Stuttgart and Atlanta must be lonely places, staffed by a few luckless interns.

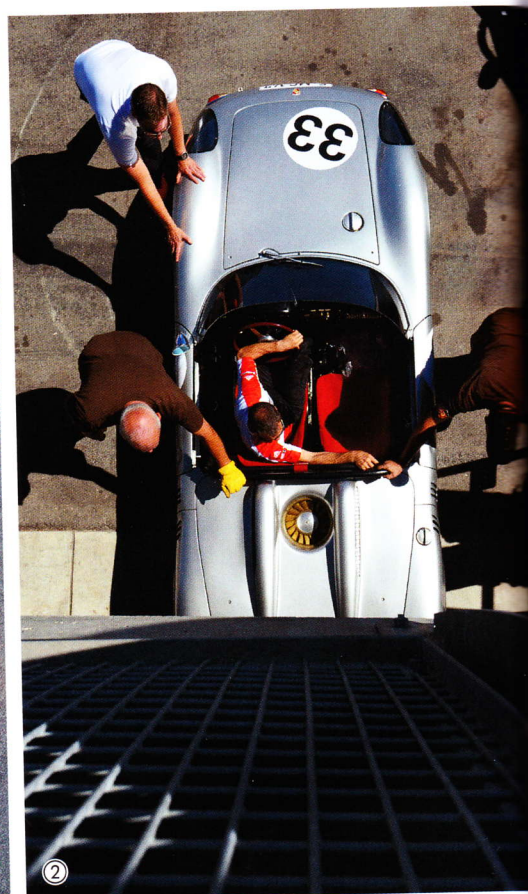
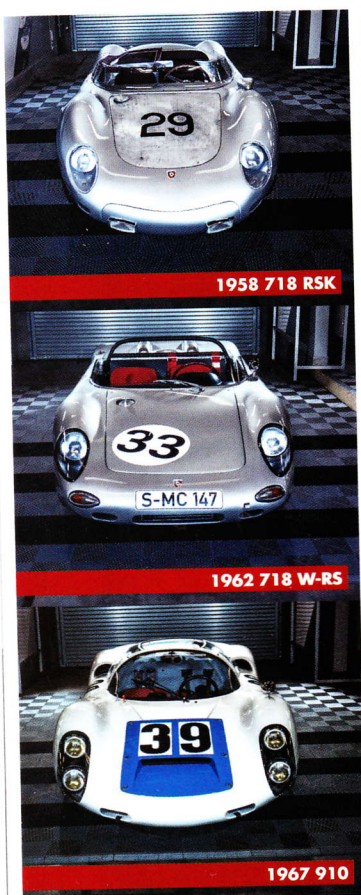
The factory has also brought nearly 50 Porsche Legends—this is actually emblazoned on their shirts—ranging from A (Dennis Aase) to Z (Jeff Zwart). The roster includes 14 Le Mans-winning drivers as well as renowned engineer Norbert Singer, team owner Alex Job, and raconteur David Piper, plus about a dozen current factory drivers and other assorted motorsports celebri-



Opposite: Le Mans icons—the 919 Hybrid that won this year, the 917K that won in 1970, and the 356/2 SL, Porsche's first works entry—front a spectacular field of Le Mans racers at Rennsport Reunion V.

ties. Nowhere else would diminutive mechanic Valentin Schaeffer be treated like a rock star.

Even more impressive than the people are the cars. In a spacious hospitality plaza created to feed, entertain, and edify the faithful, I'm drawn immediately to an exhibit of three thoroughbreds that showcase the remarkable breadth of the marque's racing heritage—the spatted 1951 356/2 SL that was part of the factory's first effort at Le Mans, the thunderous flat-twelve 917K that gave the company its first win at Le Mans in 1970, and the brutally efficient 919 Hybrid that scored win number 17 this past June. Yet this is merely an appetizer.



Exploring the paddock, I see the Chopard Heritage Display under an awning large enough to serve as a sail for an America's Cup entry. Here, arrayed in three punctiliously delineated rows, are 63 privately owned Porsche race cars, each one more impressive than the last. Where to start? With the 550 coupe, chassis number 550-01? With a pair of 908s, a short-tail coupe and a longtail that seems to go on forever? The svelte 911 Carrera RSs? The brawnier RSRs? The 934s? The 934.5s? Fire-breathing 935s, in various configurations? The failed Porsche-powered Indy car? The indomitable 917/30 Turbo Panzer, which essentially annihilated the Can-Am series? It takes several hours to make it through the entire exhibit, and by the time I'm finished, I feel like a kid who's just eaten all of his Halloween candy in one sitting.

There's no time to dawdle, though, because the *pièce de résistance* is served in the garages that line the pits along the front straight. There, arranged in chronological order, is a succession of Le Mans icons designed to peg the OMG! meter of even the most phlegmatic race fan. It seems like overkill to keep listing cars, but I just can't resist: An RSK and a 718 W-RS, a 908 LH "Flunder" Spyder and a 935 K3, a New Man 956 and a Rothmans 962, a 911 GT1-98 and the current 991 RSR. Whenever one of them is about to be started up, fans gravitate to

① **Factory Porsche racer Patrick Long powers up the hill in a 935.** ② **718 W-RS gets rolled into a garage.**

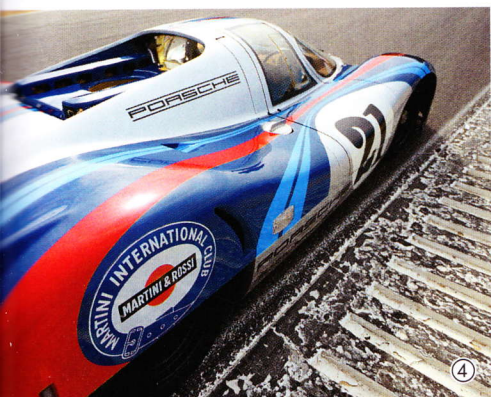
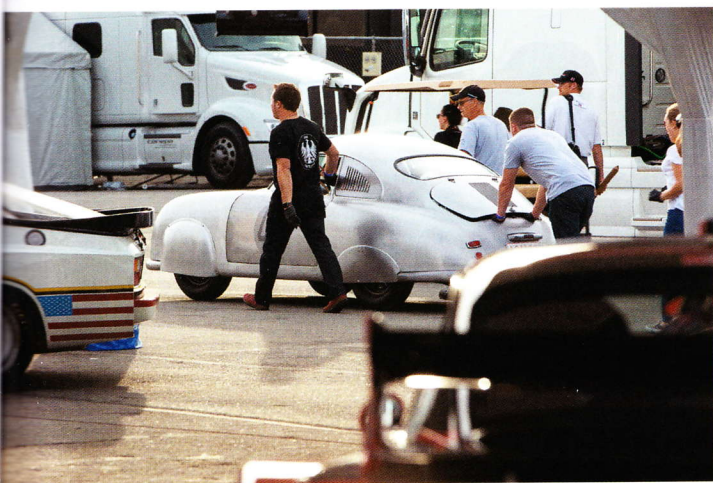
③ **Wade Carter runs flat-out in his 1966 906.** ④ **The longtail 917 raced by Vic Elford and Gerard Larrousse—both were at Rennsport—at Le Mans in 1971. This 917 reached 240 mph at Le Mans; here it did parade laps only.** ⑤ **A bevy of 911s scrap for honors in the PCA race.**

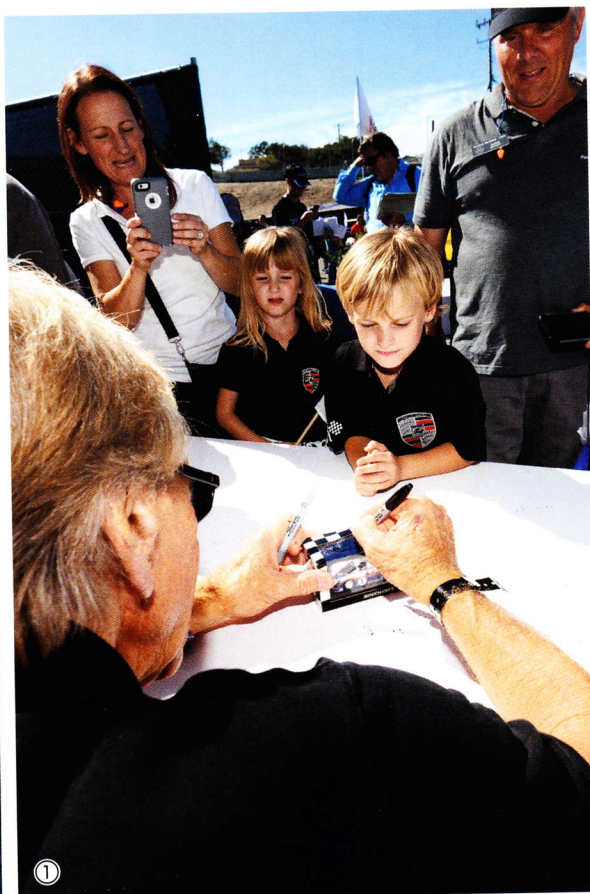
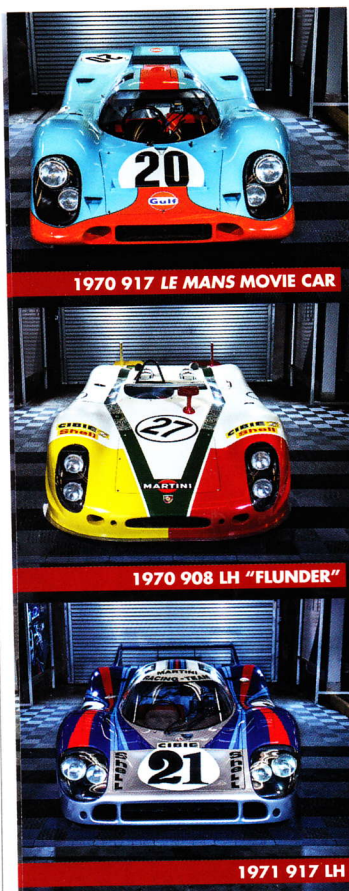
it like zombies zeroing in on fresh meat. After peering into the last garage, I find that I'm completely out of exclamation points.

HERO DRIVERS DRIFT through the paddock. There are David Piper and Le Mans winner Richard Attwood examining the Gulf 917 driven by Steve McQueen during the filming of *Le Mans*. (Morbid footnote: Piper lost his lower leg as the result of an accident during the shoot.) There's six-time Le Mans champion Jacky Ickx, still as glamorous as a movie star, standing next to the 936 he drove to victory in 1977. I run into lanky Hans-Joachim Stuck lingering near the 962 in which he earned one of his two Le Mans victories.

"Porsche is like a family to me," says Stuck. "Ferdinand Porsche built a car for my father, the Auto Union, and I won Le Mans in this Porsche. Here, you meet not only old friends, old drivers, old fans, but old cars. To tell you the truth, I didn't know that some of them still exist."

After a while, the merely spectacular seems positively *meh*. Contemporary 918 Spyder supercars start to look commonplace, and the first of the Singer-modified 911s—an exquisite piece—is treated like a reasonably attractive flight attendant in an airplane full of supermodels and Hollywood bombshells. As I make the





rounds, I count eight 917s. It's hard to keep track because most of them are painted blue and orange—who doesn't like the Gulf colors, right?—and three of them wear the same number.

Every few minutes, I see yet another black Inter-scope Porsche, the wicked-fast cars made famous by Ted Field and Danny Ongais, a.k.a. the Flyin' Hawaiian. When I mention this to racer/builder Jim Busby, he just laughs. "They had a ton of them because Danny wrote one off about every two weeks," he says.

Busby is showing me a uniquely modified Miller High Life 962—the 1989 Daytona winner—with an engine intake large enough to ingest a dachshund rising off the rear deck. Some might argue that this was the ultimate development of Porsche's longest-lived prototype. Busby explains how he fashioned it out of a honeycomb Chapman tub, with a 956 nose melded together with 962 fenders and one-off rear bodywork.

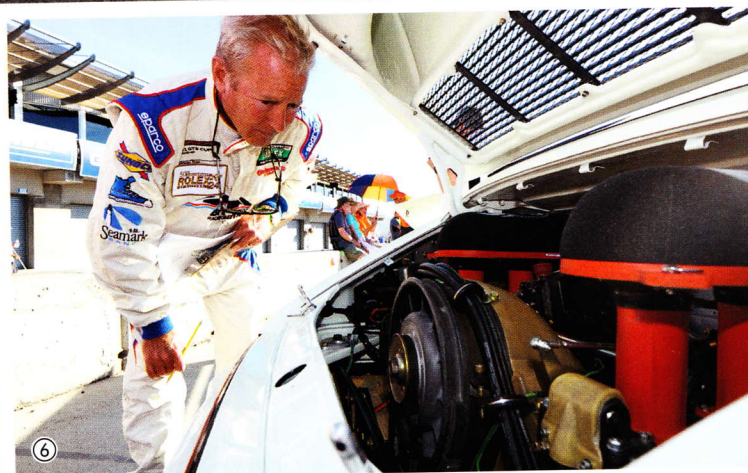
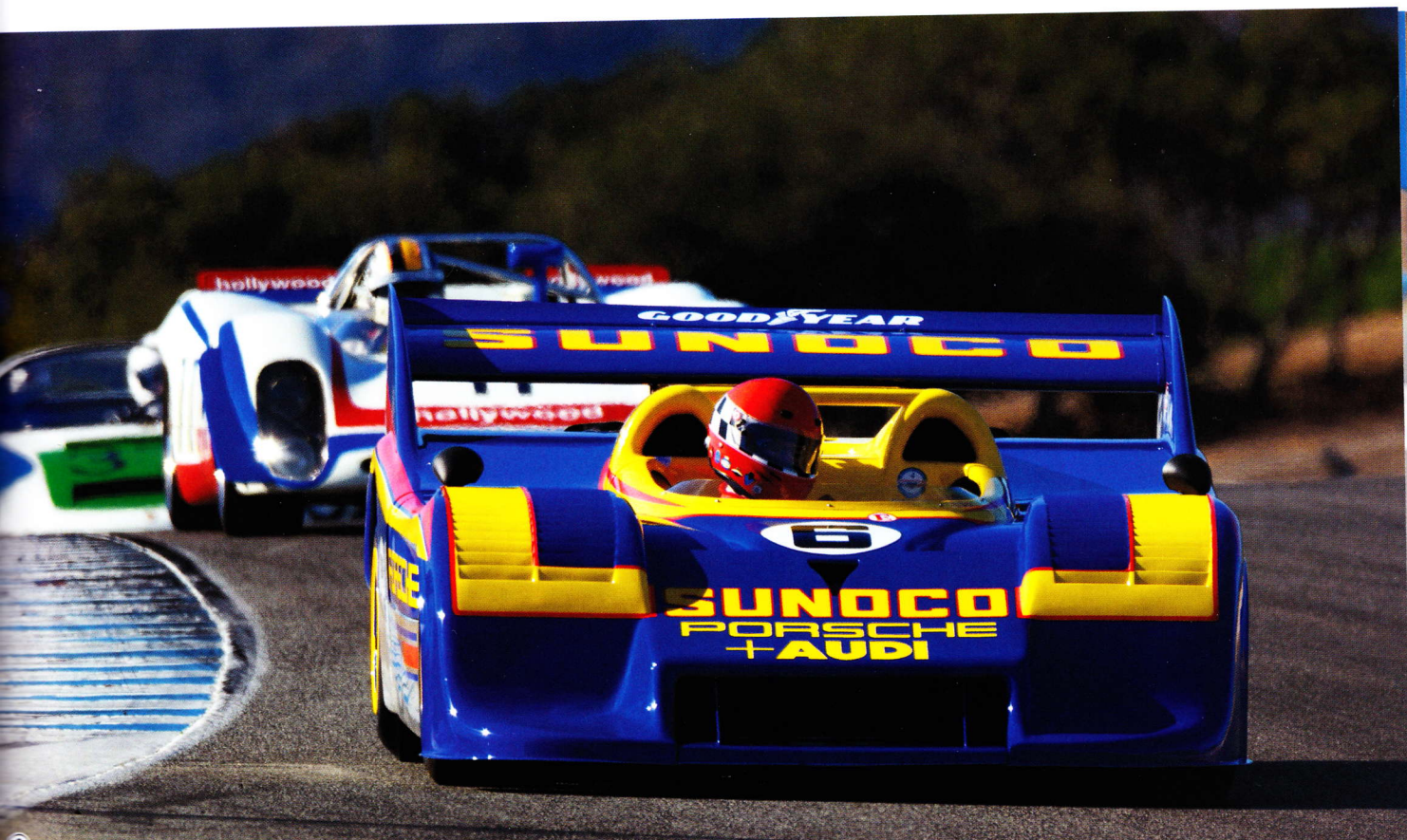
At most car shows, this level of detail would cause eyes to glaze over. But it's catnip for the obsessively knowledgeable fans at Rennsport. As vintage racer Charlie Nearburg tells me, "I have to be careful about what I say about my cars. Some of the fans know the history better than I do."

- ① **Derek Bell** signs autographs.
- ② **Norbert Singer** poses with a GT1.
- ③ **Peter Harburg's** 917/30 Can-Am beast.
- ④ **Chassis** 550-001 leads a parade of historic Porsches.
- ⑤ **Patrick Long** drops a wheel in a 911 T/R.
- ⑥ **Hurley Haywood** roams the paddock.

To be fair, Nearburg's collection needs no introduction—a 917 (painted blue and orange, natch), a 935, a 936, and a 962, all with impressive race logs. If you were playing Porsche poker, you'd call this four aces and bet the house. But this seemingly unbeatable hand is trumped by Bruce Canepa, a major driving force of Rennsport Reunion V, who's holding a royal flush plus a kicker under his nearby canopy—a 917 (in Gulf livery, of course), two 935s, two 962s, and an RS Spyder. And all of them are being raced here this weekend, which is what makes Rennsport more than a mere car show.

ALTHOUGH THEY CAN BE venerated as icons, race cars are designed with a single purpose in mind—to win races. They can't truly be understood or appreciated if they are only exhibited on pedestals in museums or squirreled away in climate-controlled garage mahals. That is why racing is an essential component of the Rennsport Reunion experience.

At this year's event, 165 historic cars would compete in five run groups, plus additional entries in a Porsche Club of America race and another race for modern 911 GT3 Cups. There's rarely a moment when the guttural bark of a flat-six engine isn't competing for attention.





That said, the term “vintage racing” is something of an oxymoron. Most of the cars at Laguna Seca are too valuable—and dangerous—to run at ten-tenths, and the major bar to entry isn’t driving talent but an investment portfolio substantial enough to afford a car with the provenance to be invited to compete here. So nobody’s channeling their inner Pedro Rodriguez or Jo Siffert and banging fenders going through the Corkscrew.

Some of the 356s in the Gmünd Cup race don’t appear to be going fast enough to merge safely into traffic on Pacific Coast Highway. Mind you, that’s not a complaint. At the front of the field, Cameron Healey and Gregory Campbell go at it like Prost and Senna in tiny, quivering Porsche-powered specials.

The Weissach Cup features three ground-pounding 917s, and guess what color scheme they all wear? Watching Gunnar Jeannette drift a 908 LH into Turn 9 is a sight to behold. Meanwhile, the Stuttgart Cup showcases no fewer than five modern RS Spyders—more than were commonly seen at American Le Mans races when they were new cars. At the risk of being haunted in perpetuity by the ghost of Ferdinand Porsche, it’s a pleasure to hear the crisp exhaust note of the non-boxer V8 engines ricocheting off the hills and grandstands.

① **The Chopard Heritage Display, with an RS Spyder front and center, was by itself worth the price of admission.**

② **An added bonus, and arguably the highlight of the weekend, was watching three Gulf-liveried 917s duking it out.**

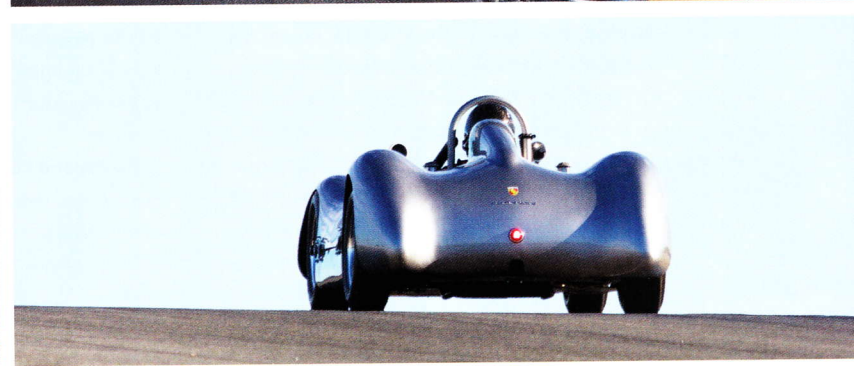
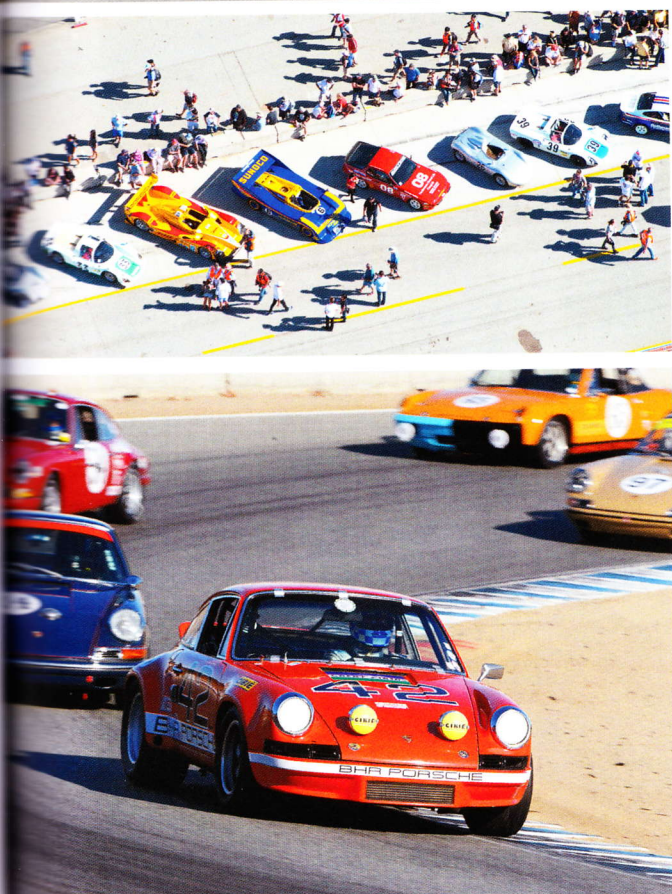
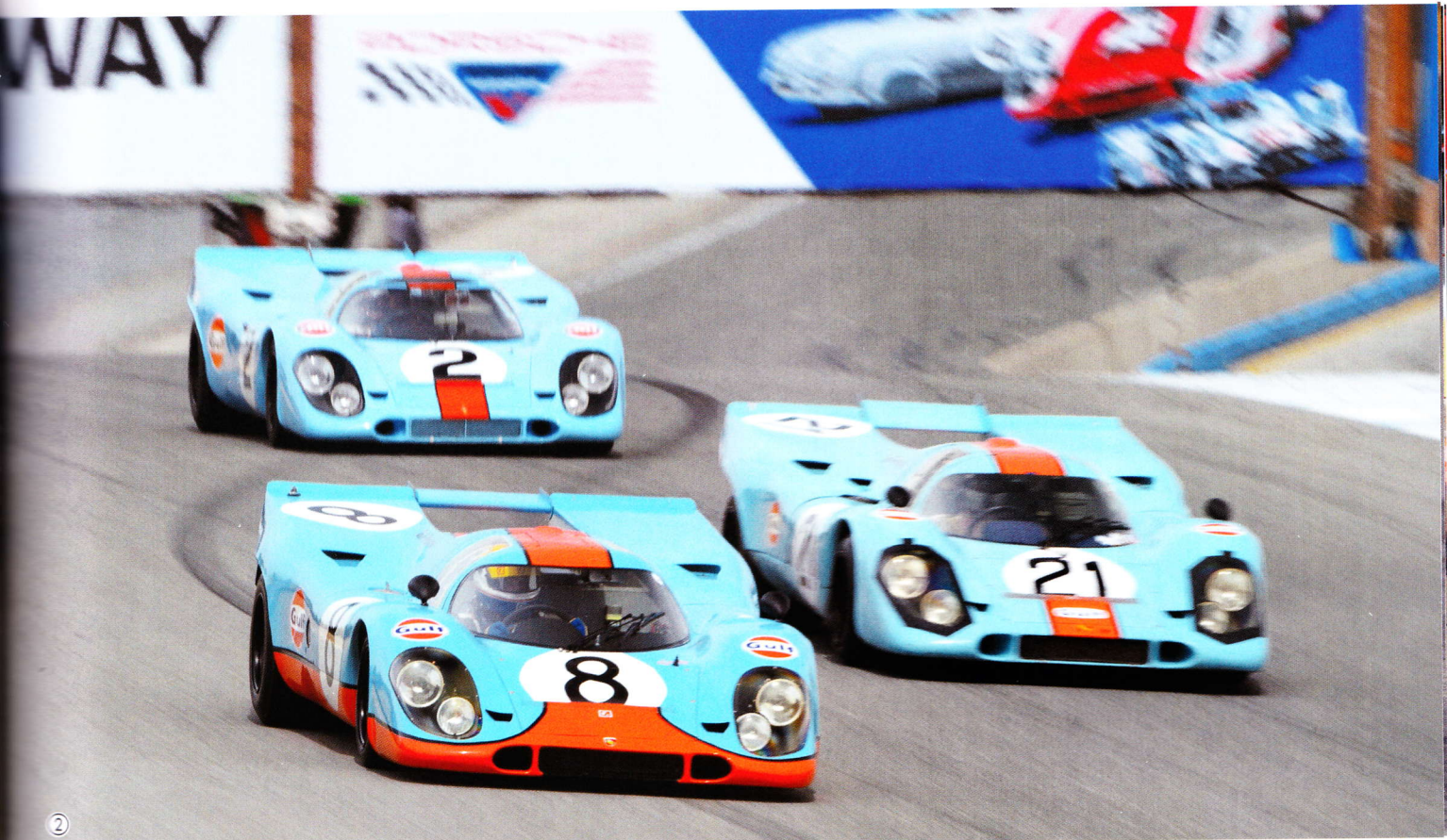
③ **The strangest car at Rennsport was the stealth Panamera used by Jeff Zwart to shoot action video.**

But the most thrilling race of all, at least for a writer of a certain age, is the Carrera Trophy. At the front of the field is what seems to be an endless train of flame-belching 935s, 934s, and RSRs. If I squint just right, I can almost believe that I’ve ridden the Way Back Machine to 1980. Nearburg leads pretty much from flag to flag in his 935, but factory Porsche driver Patrick Long hounds him the whole way, almost sneaking past in traffic and ending up in second by a paltry 0.227 second. Nearburg is still sweaty and exhilarated when I catch up with him.

“Man, that was awesome!” he exclaims. “I had to add half a turn of boost near the end of the race. Do you know where Patrick’s at? I want to thank him for racing me so clean.”

NOT ALL OF THE 57,531 SPECTATORS who attend Rennsport are die-hard race fans, and for them there are plenty of attractions other than the action on the track. Porsche has arranged a series of Teutonicallly well-organized autograph sessions with the uppercase Legends, and the lines are so long you’d think they were giving away iPhone 7s.

Another queue snakes through the nearby pop-up store, where official Porsche merchandise includes a





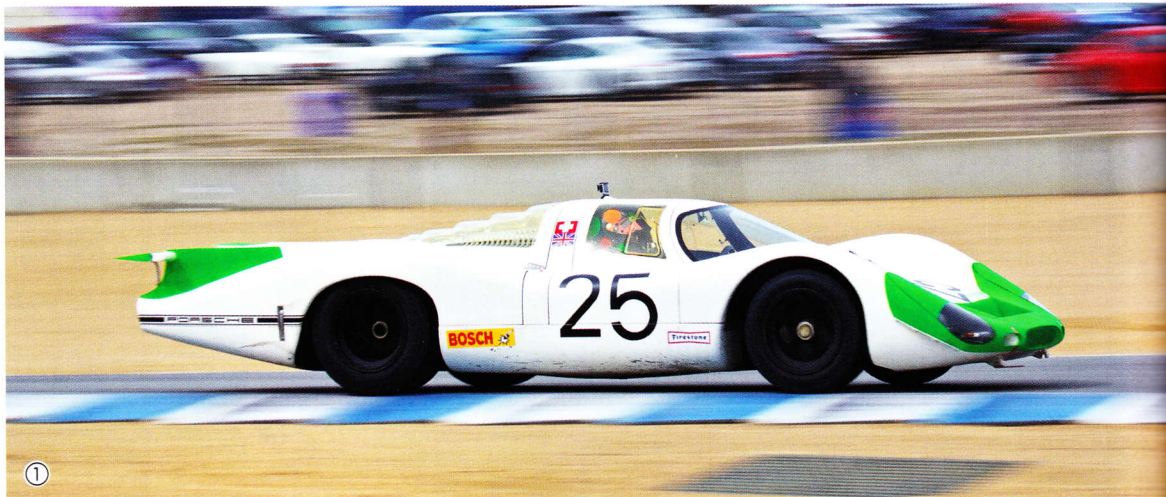
1987 962C



1994 DAUER 962 LE MANS



1995 WSC-95 SPYDER



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②

\$60.45 tire gauge and a wristwatch retailing for \$13,000. That's modest, however, in light of a new \$32,000 B.R.M. watch in nearby Vendors Row, with a face that is hand-painted by regular *Panorama* contributor Nicolas Hunziker. Preposterous? They sold five over the weekend.

Jules Doty pays \$37 for a T-shirt and pronounces himself satisfied. "The memories will live forever," he jokes. "I missed the last two Rennsports. This year, I said, 'I don't care if I have to climb over dead bodies, I'm making it out there.'"

There are relative bargains to be had in Vendors Row, where booths were sold out a month before the event. I'm tempted by a set of Porsche demitasse cups going for \$65—\$20 less than the ones in the Porsche store. Still, I realize I could quickly max out my credit cards if I spend too much time browsing through tents bulging with scale models, books, posters, race gear, steering wheels, differentials, an "If you were driving a Porsche, you wouldn't be able to read this" decal, and at least a thousand items bearing a likeness of or allusion to Steve McQueen.

Beyond the vendors, vast unpaved parking lots have been "landscaped" with about 1,400 Porsche street cars arranged in 20 model-specific corrals, with 356s and 912s over here and 968s and Boxsters over there. Like a

- ① A 1969 908 LH raced by Gunnar Jeannette.
- ② Street cars, even ones as exotic as the 918 Spyder, didn't draw as much attention. Thirteen (!) of them were parked at PCA's tent.
- ③ The 1998 911 GT1 Le Mans winner brought by the Porsche Museum.
- ④ The Gmünd Cup race proved that small-bore Porsches could produce big excitement.

salmon returning unerringly to its spawning grounds, I home in on a 911 painted in—wait for it—Gulf livery. A tribute car, I figure, or maybe just a poseur. But the last laugh is on me.

It turns out the car is an exceedingly rare 1968 T/R that finished 12th in the Monte Carlo Rally. "This car is totally original except for the paint job," owner Stephen Childs tells me. Still, that didn't stop him from driving it from his home in Northern California all the way to Daytona for Rennsport Reunion III.

Elsewhere, I spot several members of R Gruppe, the semi-secret club open only by invitation to the owners of select performance-oriented Porsches. (One club member is here from Singapore.) Yet at the same time, the corrals are also home to 944s, 924s, and 914s.

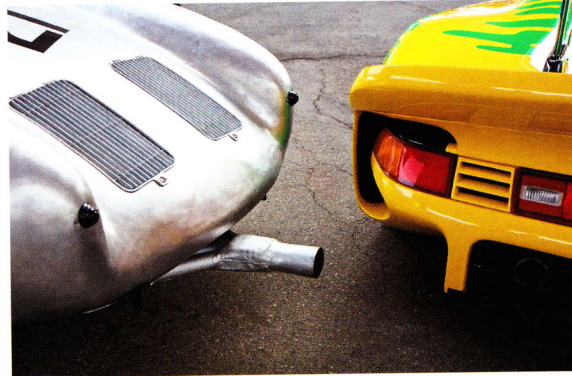
The vibe is completely different from what you'd find at a Ferrari event. This isn't to say that Ferrari owners don't love their cars—but Ferraris are treated more like totems than exotic machines because they cost so much and are driven so infrequently. The Porsche tribe isn't nearly as exclusive. Simply owning a copy of *Porsche: Excellence Was Expected* is enough to make you an honorary member. Extra credit if the book was autographed by Karl Ludvigsen.

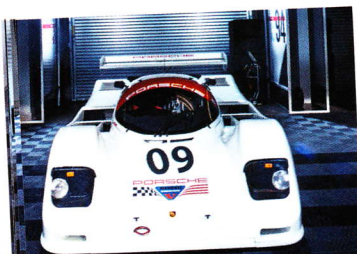


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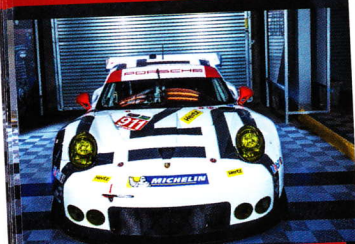


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1988 962C



2015 911 RSR



2015 919 HYBRID



The Rolex Monterey Motorsports Reunion, which is also held at Laguna Seca, is more of a happening than Rennsport, so it attracts droves of spectators who don't know the difference between Dario Franchitti and an Isotta Fraschini. And unlike, for instance, the Amelia Island Concours d'Elegance, there are no auctions associated with Rennsport, so conversations between would-be masters of the universe aren't dominated by brain-frying discussions about numbers-matching engines, the exorbitant cost of restoration projects, and how the strength of the dollar will affect car values.

It sounds ridiculous to describe a car show encompassing the better part of \$1 billion of irreplaceable icons as a grass-roots event, but that's what Rennsport feels like. Because they're so rabid and so invested in what they're seeing, the fans seem more like participants than paying spectators, and the event clearly wouldn't be the same without their enthusiasm. I wonder if Kealoha, the guy with the Gulf-livery shop cart, plans to attend the next Rennsport Reunion.

"Where is it?" he asks eagerly.

"I don't think they've decided yet."

"Wherever it is," he responds, "I'll be there."

So will I. ●

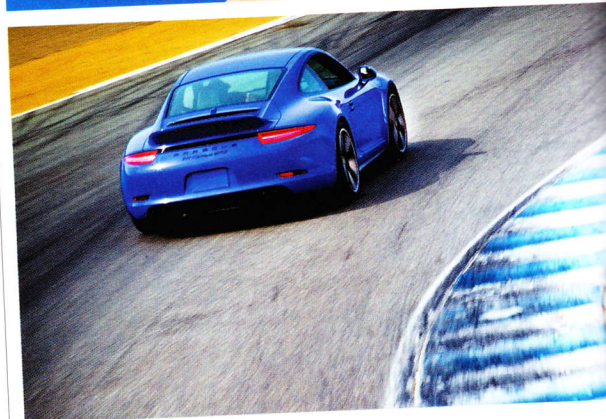
① Stephen Thein's 910 about to be overtaken by Bruce Canepa's 917.

② Ralph and Lisa Katsman, winners of PCA's 911 GTS Club Coupe raffle—and the Club Blau 911 they won in the photo below.

③ In a battle of 935s, Steve Schmidt is chased by Leh Keen.

④ Le Mans winner Jürgen Barth plays defense in an RSR as Mark Hotchkis tries to sneak by.

⑤ John Higgins in his 1959 718 RSK.





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