

PORSCHE PANORAMA

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Return of a Champion

By Bob Carlson

More than 17 years later, the winner of the first IMSA GT race ever held is back on track

Below: Now restored, IMSA's first race victor is ready to resume its championship-winning form. Inset: The late Peter Gregg on track with the 914/6 in 1971.

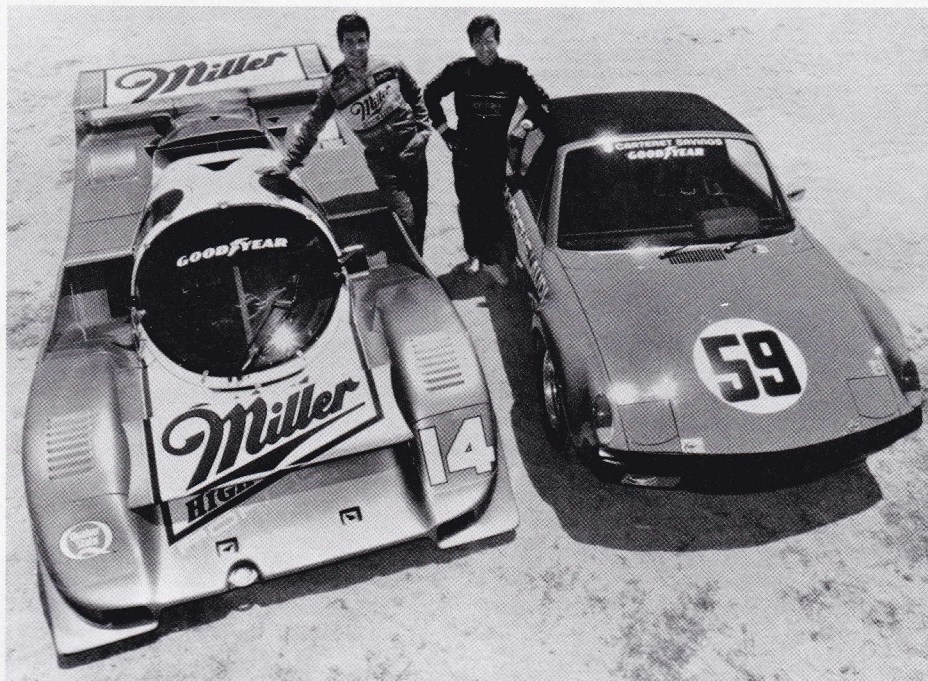


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GEOFFREY HEWITT

IMSA's first and current champion cars and drivers were united at Palm Beach in April. Defending IMSA GTP Champion Chip Robinson (left) poses with his 962 while Hurley Haywood stands beside the 914/6 which he and Peter Gregg drove to the very first IMSA championship in 1971.



GEOFFREY HEWITT

A famous general once lamented that “old soldiers never die—they just fade away.” The same can be said for aging race cars, especially those of championship caliber.

Oh sure, some former championship machines disappear forever, either to rust behind some weathered garage or to be scrapped for parts—parts used to build other champions. But in this day and age, with values of vintage race cars (especially championship-winning ones) skyrocketing, most of these famed vehicles find their way into the hands of public museums or private collections, never again to see the light of a race track or bathe in the glory of victory lane.

One notable exception is a tangerine-colored Porsche 914/6 bearing chassis number 914.043.0315. More than 17 years after winning its first race, this nimble machine is back in competition—and back in the winner’s circle.

Of course, this veteran performer isn’t just another race winner. One of only 11 special 914/6 race versions built by the factory in 1970, it was originally purchased by Jacksonville, Florida, Porsche dealer Peter Gregg. With it, Gregg and co-driver Hurley Haywood won the very first International Motor Sports Association (IMSA) GT race ever held. This relatively obscure event, staged at Virginia International Raceway in Danville in April of 1971, marked the humble beginning of what

has now become the premier sports car racing series in the world, and Gregg’s and Haywood’s victory began a legendary Porsche IMSA GT win list that currently totals 281, more than twice as many as the nearest competing make.

The talented duo and their Brumos Porsche-owned 914/6 raced on to further successes that inaugural IMSA six-event season. Pitted against the best GT cars in the country, many with engines more than twice the 914/6’s two-liter size, they scored additional overall wins at Bridgehampton, New York, and Summit Point, West Virginia. The trio also tallied GTU (Grand Touring Under 2.5 Liters) class victories at Talladega and Charlotte. Coupled with a fourth overall and second in GTU in the remaining 1971 race at Daytona Beach, Gregg and Haywood earned the initial IMSA GT Overall Drivers Championship, while the 914/6 captured the first IMSA GTU Manufacturers title.

The trusty Brumos 914/6 truly launched the professional driving careers of Gregg and Haywood. Gregg, who soon developed the “Peter Perfect” nickname due to his meticulous driving style and car preparation, went on to capture five more IMSA driving titles and establish himself as the second winningest driver in IMSA GT history. Until his death in 1980, he set standards for all others on the IMSA circuit to emulate. Haywood won

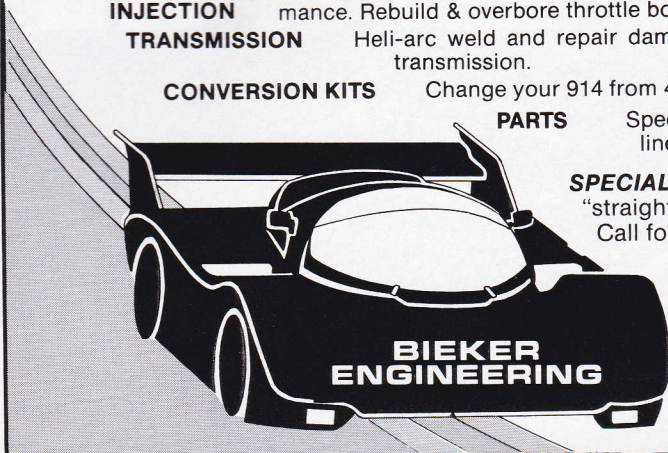
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another GT Drivers Championship the following season and has gone on to set the IMSA all-time career record for most race starts. The soft-spoken competitor, currently ranked third on the GT career victory list, continues to win races to this day.

The tangerine 914/6 also established Porsche's winning IMSA tradition. Since that first title in 1971, Porsche has tallied 25 more IMSA Manufacturers Championships—a total nearly equal to all other makes combined!

Following the 1971 season, Brumos sold the potent 914/6 to Mexican driving star Hector Rebaque. Over the next several years it was raced extensively (nearly 20,000 miles to be exact) in Mexico and changed owners at least twice. But it wasn't until February of this year that the old warrior was unearthed in Mexico City by a California man who immediately contacted Brumos Racing Crew Chief Jim Bailie to verify its authenticity.

"One of the first items we checked were the doors," related Bob Snodgrass, president of Brumos Porsche. "The car had initially weighed more than Peter (Gregg) wanted, so he drilled holes in its doors. Although it ended up saving only half a pound or so, it was yet another example of Peter's determination to take advantage of every trick he could."

Satisfied that this was indeed the original car (the paperwork, chassis number and door holes all matched), Brumos purchased their first champion and began a remarkable restoration program.

"The car was in deplorable condition when we bought it," Snodgrass commented. "It had literally been run into the ground. And so many modifications had been made to its original configuration that we had to start the rebuilding process from the bare chassis on up."

Under the direction of Crew Chief Bailie, Brumos crew members Barry Kogut, Paul Swalina, Mark Stump, Siegmund Mayerlen, Robert Kennedy, Don Leatherwood, William Nass, Albert Broadfoot and Fred Clark completed the mammoth task in just 59 days. They gave so much attention to detail that the tangerine-colored paint was custom matched, and the since-discontinued Kendall Motor Oil sponsor decal hand-painted on the car. The pristine machine also carries Gregg's famed #59 car number which was retired by IMSA two days after his death.

"The only substantial alterations made to the car increase driver safety," Snodgrass said. "They included adding braces to the roll bar and installing a fuel cell (designed to prevent explosion on impact) in the gas tank. But the passenger seatbelt is the same style used by Peter and Hurley when they drove in 1971."



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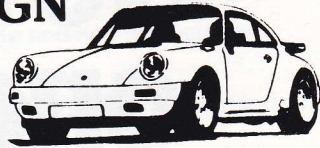
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And the door holes are still there, even though they could have been filled.

"There was no point in filling them," Haywood said. "We wouldn't want to do it anyway. Those were Peter's holes and, really, this whole restoration program is in memory of him."

But the program did not end with a beautifully restored race car. This champion was not destined to spend the rest of its life on static display. Only days after its completion, Snodgrass drove the 914/6 to victory in the April 23rd historic race at West Palm Beach, Florida. The tangerine machine was back in the winner's circle 17 years and six days after capturing its first race.

Snodgrass and the 914/6 were again victorious in the next historic event at Road Atlanta, winning the production class and finishing fourth overall in the race behind a pair of Porsche 908s and a Porsche 910. As a result, Snodgrass now intends to defend his 1987 Classic Auto Racing Enthusiasts (CARE) Drivers Championship with the 914/6 by entering it in at least six more historic races this year. He then plans to run it in a like number of events in the seasons to come.

"I believe this little car has a soul," Snodgrass explains, "a soul devoted to racing. As a champion, it has earned its right to race."

And not fade away. ❁