



Driving Brumos

WE DRIVE DAYTONA IN A 914-6 GT COURTESY OF BOB SNODGRASS, THE MAN RENNSPORT REUNION HONORED AND A FORCE BEHIND THE MOST FAMOUS PORSCHE DEALER OF ALL

STORY BY PETE STOUT PHOTOS BY RICH CHENET AND AS NOTED



Robert F. Snodgrass. It would have been hard to know American Porsche racing without knowing Bob. I first met him in 1998, at Porsche's 50th birthday bash in Monterey. He had brought a fleet of famous Floridian race cars, each one an icon forged by Brumos' decades-long dedication to the sport.

Hired on by Peter Gregg in 1972, Bob became a critical figure in Brumos' consistent success both in business and racing. Eventually, he bought the company with friend turned business partner Dan Davis. Bob and I talked several times over the years after that, but one conversation stands out. It was just before the first Rennsport Reunion, in 2001. I remember his generosity. And my utter surprise.

"Bring your helmet and suit and find me when you get there," commanded Bob's unmistakable voice, big the like man himself. "I'll put you in a car." When a voice like Bob's tells you to do something, you do as told. But, when I found him at Lime Rock, he was apologetic. All of Brumos' vintage cars were taken. Seeing as Paul Newman was driving one of its 914s, I wasn't disappointed. But I could tell Bob was.

As a small consolation, he offered to take me out for a few laps. I didn't see it as such, however, because he was driving a car I obsessed over in *Excellence* as a teen. One of the most famous examples of the Porsche that pulled me into the fold, it was the 914-6 GT in which Peter Gregg and Hurley Haywood won the first IMSA GT race and championship, in 1971. Not knowing my first car was a 914, a car I've kept, Bob had picked the perfect taxi.

More than that 914's fluid handling and fantastic noises, I recall Bob behind its wheel. Or, rather, his feet on its pedals. Three laps in, I noticed that, along with his race suit, he was wearing penny loafers. With no socks. What became clear to me that day was that Bob Snodgrass was totally, *completely* at home in and around race cars. That race cars, and racing, were an indelible part of who he was.

Back on pit lane, Bob offered an iron-grip handshake and boomed, "You call me next time. I'll make *sure* you drive one of our cars." But, in 2004, when Rennsport Reunion II was slated for Daytona, I didn't call. Looking back, I'm not sure why. I just didn't. When PCNA announced Rennsport would be back at Daytona in 2007, I decided to take Bob up on his offer. But, just as I was working up the gumption to call, he died. A heart attack took Bob on April 24, 2007. He was just 64.

Talking to Bob Carlson at Porsche Cars North America about Bob's passing and how much he'd be missed at Rennsport,

I mentioned 2001's offer and how I felt it died with Bob. Carlson felt otherwise: "You need to call Hurley — it would be a great way to remember Bob." Hurley, today a Vice President at Brumos, agreed.

"Maybe you have a 914-4?" I suggested timidly. *Or a skateboard, with a 59 on it...* was what I thought next, but didn't say. "I don't know about a 914..." pondered Hurley aloud. "Maybe we'll put you in an RSR." *Just keep your mouth shut*, I thought. *And drive whatever he says to. After all, Hurley has instructed you for years now...right?*

Two months later, Hurley called. "You're in. You'll be driving the IMSA 914-6 GT." After my first call with Hurley, a friend of mine asked which of Brumos' Porsches I'd pick if I had a choice. My answer wasn't "RSR." It was a 914-6 — not due to my affinity for 914s, but because 1) it would be fast, but not too fast, and 2) old, but not too old. That Hurley's choice was the car I rode in with Bob made it a *perfect fit*...

Busy. That's the lobby at the Hilton on this, the last Thursday of October. It's a who's who of Porsche people. Hurley is busy when I find him, but he tells me to get to the track, find Don Leatherwood, and get fit in the 914. Riding around the paddock, looking for the Brumos rig, I expect to be jaded at my third Rennsport. Wrong. I'm not jaded, I'm breathless.

550s, 908s, 917s, 935s, 962s...many of them *the* cars that made their type numbers famous. At Brumos' trailer are more gems. The 1992 Supercar Championship-winning Turbo, the Copenhagen 962, the Daytona-winning RSR I might have driven, and the 914-6 GT I will. It's so overwhelming I forget who I'm supposed to find. So I ask the guy who looks like he's in charge. His face is initially intimidating, the strong face of someone who has seen a lot.

"I'm Don Leatherwood," says the man with an instantly recognizable name as he offers a firm handshake. His easy grin suggests the lines etched on this face are from smiling wide and often. I've heard a lot about Brumos, about its history, about its sense of family. It's soon clear why. Don has worked there for 26 years. After earning a degree in electrical engineering in 1986, he was going to take a job with AT&T — until Snodgrass intervened. Says Don: "Bob called me into his office and said, 'Leatherwood, there, you'll be a number. Here, you'll be a *superstar*.'" Don stayed. And Bob was right.

I meet crew members Andy Chapman and Elfrick "Speedy" Gonzalez next. Andy is a 45-year employee, going back to the company's early days as Brundage Motors. When I ask Speedy how long he's been with



Brumos, he smiles broadly as he realizes he marked 10 years just days ago. PR liaison Patti Tantillo has only been with Brumos for a year, but one look at her pristine 993 Turbo in the paddock is enough to know she's serious about Porsches. She was well known to Brumos when Bob convinced her to leave her job at a credit union to join the team. She calls the switch her ticket to "pursue a dream." The fifth team member I'll meet today is Paul Powell, who has spent the last two years of his retirement caring for these cars at the Brumos Museum.

I'm still blown away by Andy's 45 years of service. "So you must have known Peter Gregg," I begin. "What was he like?" Andy's reply comes easily: "People say a lot about Peter, but I'll tell you something: Peter was ahead of his time. He made me shop foreman in the sixties." Even as a California kid of the 1970s, it doesn't take long to catch his drift. Promoting an African American to a management position must have caused a stir in Florida at the time. I suspect Gregg knew what he was doing. Andy was the first black man to go through technical training at Mercedes-Benz in Germany, and watching his hands move over one car's suspension earlier told me he's a gifted wrench.

Stories about Bob begin to flow, stories of a man who inspired his employees and surprised them with his generosity. Speedy tells me he once fell for a new Ford Focus in town. While he was figuring out how to buy it, the Focus disappeared from the lot. Secretly, Bob had arranged for Brumos to buy the car and make it available to Speedy as a surprise. Over the next five years, Speedy modified the car into what Don calls "the world's most expensive Focus."

I ask Don about when Bob had to quit smoking, a process that meant Hurley had to stop because he'd been bumming cigarettes off Bob for years. Don smiles, then tells me a little more about a character who really was larger than life: "When Bob smoked, everyone had to have an ashtray on their desk, whether they smoked or not. When Bob had to quit, no one could have an ashtray on their desk — and the areas where they *could* smoke got further and further away. At one point, Bob put a sign up out back. It said 'Addiction Alley.'"

As the laughter dies down in the race-trailer lounge, the sound of rain, edge of hurricane rain, takes over. The team runs to get the race cars under the awning. I follow to help push. We're only in the rain for seconds, but we get soaked. Quickly as it came, the rain recedes. At this point, it's lunch. Turns out there's only one place to go: Sorrento's, a small Italian place and Snodgrass' favorite spot in Daytona. He would tow the team there for multiple meals during race weekends. Or have it cater.

At Sorrento's, I wonder why. It's not the location, a strip mall. It's not the decor, unaltered from the 1970s. So it's gotta be the food. Right? I order fettuccini. It's good, but not great. The team doesn't seem to notice. They just seem happy to be here, everyone telling their best "Bob stories" while wrinkling their noses and adopting his gruff tone. More than anything, I'm surprised how quickly I feel at home — how much I already feel like part of the team. I suspect the group soaking has helped quite a bit with the bonding process.

My jeans are still wet behind my knees when we head back to push Brumos' 917

Club Brumos (1). Susan Snodgrass, Brian Redman, Bob Carlson, and Harris Snodgrass honor a driving force (2). Waiting for rain with the 962 at the group photo (3).

and 962 out for PCNA's group photo. With hands on the 962's rear wing, I see mystified eyes on familiar faces. *They're wondering what I'm doing.* I'm wondering, too, but suddenly realize I'd rather push and clean cars than watch, which is what I've done at the past two Rennsport Reunions.

The rain comes once more, gentle at first, then harder. Holding a cover over the 917's open cockpit, Patti and I get soaked. We don't care; it's magical to be around so many 917s with raindrops running down their fenders. As we push the cars back to the paddock, a third monsoon arrives in time to soak us again — just before a banquet I'm supposed to dress up for.

I show up soggy, but happy. The only thing I'd hoped to accomplish today but didn't was getting a refresher ride around the track, as I've only driven Daytona once — three years ago. At the banquet, I ask Brumos DP driver Darren Law to show me the line on a course map. I listen intently, trying to transfer his plan-view into 3D...

Buckling into the 914 at 9:00 AM after a bad night's sleep, it's time to head out for first practice. I had wondered why Hurley put me in Brumos' irreplaceable 914-6 GT and took its other 914-6. Now I know. Bob loved 914s, and the one Hurley is in was his baby. It has the same carbureted 2.5 worth 230 hp and the same tires as my mount, but it's a lighter, stiffer roadster with less frontal area, four-piston brakes,

and a slick-shifting Hewland gearbox. I'm sure Hurley doesn't mind the upgrades...

Not that I'm envious. As Speedy cinches my belts down and a flat six throbs behind me, my hands grasp the steering wheel of a car I never imagined driving. Exiting the pits, I head into the infield road course and accelerate. Its curves aren't so different to those of many tracks I know well, and this car handles a lot like my own 914. Its 2.5 sounds beautiful, and is very, very strong. Too bad its brakes aren't. Stopping power is okay, but the pedal is soft. Confidence-inspiring, it's not. Meanwhile, 67 race cars are on track, passing me on the inside *and* outside as I struggle to learn Daytona in a piece of history with funky brakes.

After feeling my way around the infield, I head onto the banking. Last time I hit this big angle at speed, it was in modern street Porsches with the latest aerodynamics and suspension. Today, I'm driving a barn door with torsion bars. Even so, I notice the tach

winding its way to 7000 rpm. In fifth. The speedo is lifeless, but I figure this translates to about 150. 150 mph. I've never gone this fast in an old Porsche, and it's a completely different sensation of speed.

Knowing 911S brakes are all I've got to slow this thing down, and that the vintage roll bar won't win a fight with the outer wall, I lift early for the chicane called the Bus Stop, then brake gingerly. Scarier than the soft pedal is the tail. It's wagging ever so slightly, sending me a message: *I'll wag harder if you brake harder.* Good thing I braked early. A dozen Porsches thunder by to my right. Then Hurley hurtles by, braking deeper than all of them. He's *flying*.

With my tires warmed and brakes figured — they're workable, but not ideal — I decide to use the session to learn the track. Sports cars do almost all of the high-speed bowl, missing only a short section between Turn 1, where they enter the infield, and Turn 6, where they rejoin the bowl. Out

of Turn 6, it's a steep climb up the banking. Slow cars are supposed to run up the banking, fall right back down, and hug the inside. Faster cars pass on the outside.

There's no rev-limiter, so I've been asked to shift at 7800 rpm. That's no problem, because I'm getting nowhere near 7800 in fifth. Driving at autobahn speeds in a 37-year-old car tilted at a 31° angle, peering out of the upper edge of its windshield, is new territory. A lot of cars pass on the banking. Through open windows, I can hear the flat four or six in each battling the wind at wide open throttle. Distinctly, perfectly.

After just 15 minutes, I'm tired. Despite this, one image etches itself into my memory: chasing a 904 towards the big, black letters on the wall that spell DAYTONA — and the huge American flag behind them. Watching my mirrors, I make way for faster cars. With great care, I pass a few, including an equally cautious 550 Spyder. When I see the checkered flag, I'm relieved.



Through the first hairpin on the infield with the rest of the Under 2.5-liter group (4). Haywood passing on the inside in Brumos' other 914-6, a trick roadster (5). Passing at speed on the high banks (6).



"Now, all you need to do," says Hurley back in the paddock, "is to just get off the brakes!" This incites laughter — Speedy's roar on one end of the spectrum, my soft chuckle on the other. Then Bruce Leven, a fixture of 962 racing in the 1980s, walks up. He crowds Hurley at my door and offers advice between jabs sent both my and Hurley's way. Despite a disappointing practice session, days don't get much better.

The soft pedal is an easy fix; the brakes can be bled before afternoon practice. As for the wiggly tail, Hurley says it's timed to the bumps before the Bus Stop and tells me to relax my grip on the wheel. But Darren Law, who has driven this 914-6, tells me to hold its wheel firmly. *Oh, boy...* Don and I discuss other ways to quell the tail, like alignment, brake bias, or rear ride-height. The latter is out, as the extra-low rear of Hurley's 914 required inner-fender work.

The rest of the morning vaporizes and, before I know it, it's time for lunch. When

I get to the trailer, the team is gone. I know where to find them, though. This time, I have what Speedy's having: spaghetti. But, when it comes, I'm still at a loss for why Snodgrass held Sorrento's so dear.

The afternoon passes just as quickly as the morning did. For all of us. In addition to tending to two 914s, the team is working on the 962, 917, and RSR. And, throughout the day, the Brumos area is filled with people from its past. Rennsport is billed as a reunion and, for this team, it very much is. At one point, Brumos' first crew chief, Jack Atkinson, wanders over. Then another older gentleman walks up. It's Bill Bencker, who raced with Gregg in the 1960s. Both are quickly surrounded. Before we know it, it's time for afternoon practice. Unfortunately, the brake bleed got lost in the frenzy.

Not surprisingly, afternoon practice is little different. I'm just as uneasy, but do my best to learn the track while keeping the GT's flanks unwrinkled. Hurley blows by on

his way to the Bus Stop again, moving at something that looks like triple my pace. It might as well be. Now that my transponder works, we can compare times.

There's no comparison. Hurley turns a fast lap of 2:04.588, making him faster in a normally-aspirated 914-6 than all but four of the turbocharged 935s on hand. As for me? 2:42.549. So a mere 38 seconds separate us. The GT may need a brake bleed and a few adjustments, but I know the bigger part of the problem out there is me. "Just drive it," says Don in the paddock. "The worst thing would be for you to not have fun. Bob would have wanted you to drive that car. Hell, he always did..."

That night, I make two decisions before falling asleep: 1) if Saturday practice is no different, I need to hand the key back and thank Brumos for the privilege and 2) I'll keep watching my mirrors, but I'm not going to *drive them* anymore. If someone wants to go by, they'll have to earn it...



Discussing the 914-6 GT's handling with Hurley (1). Leatherwood and the author look in on the aftermath of #59's last run up the front straight (2). Getting a tow (3). Back out on track in the Turbo Supercar (4) and Helmuth Bott's 959 prototype (5)...



Breakfast. I'm up early, visualizing the course over the healthiest meal IHOP can muster. At the track, Speedy and Tom Seabolt Jr., the team's newest member, bleed the brakes as I pump. There is air in the lines — a *lot* of air. Halfway through the job, a sun so bright it hurts pops up. Holding a hand over closed eyes, I keep on pumping. Suddenly, the searing ceases. I open my eyes to see a towel on the windshield and Andy nod as he walks away.

After suiting up, I climb into the GT as Speedy and Tom check tire pressures. I ask, "19 psi, or point-five less for Bob. He liked the car a bit softer," answers Speedy. I ask if that means more or less oversteer. "Less," answers Don, standing nearby. I decide 18.5 psi sounds good to me, too. What Don isn't telling me is he lowered the rear ride height ever so slightly, too.

Those three tweaks add up to a GT that feels *amazing* as I roar out of the pits. With heat in the tires, I can tell it's much faster. In the pits, timers confirm this. I've dropped just over 19 seconds, consistently running in the low 2:20s. Out here, I don't know that, but I *do* notice how few cars I'm seeing. I must have seen all 67 yesterday. Most of them passed me, many more than once in a session. Today, far fewer go by. Best of all, Hurley hasn't found me. And he won't.

"Bob would have wanted you to drive that car..." Through the infield, I'm using second- and third-gear torque and all the revs to pass multiple cars. I'm using more of the GT's grip and getting comfortable at speed, too. That doesn't mean I'm not scared. Heading for the Bus Stop brake markers at 7400 rpm in fifth gear, I notice my right leg. I'm steady, calm, precise in every input. But, from hip to heel, my right leg is shaking. That jangling leg is a tell. It's the result of forcing my right toe to keep the throttle pinned longer than I want to before trusting two-piston calipers. When I do, I discover the tail wag is gone.

By comparison, the banking is a cakewalk. I was worried about this spoilerless 914's lack of downforce, but the banking is like a safety blanket, compressing the suspension as I round the bowl. Being fast here is critical to a good lap, because the oval represents the vast majority of this 3.56-mile course. The 914 feels fine at 150, but some of the bumps on the banking can be unsettling. I sense I've got a lot to learn about steering this old Porsche at speed. I need to build more muscle memory, more finesse. That's why, coming out of Turn 6, I'm short-shifting third to fourth and fourth to fifth. Foregoing harder acceleration leaves time on the table and means I won't reach 7800 in fifth, but I want to get up to fifth so I can concentrate on steering.



Towards what must be the halfway point of the session, I'm still learning but feel like I'll be ready to use all of third and fourth in Sunday qualifying. Doing so should shave several seconds on the bowl without risking the car the way trying to trim tenths on the infield might. And faster feels safer on the bowl anyway. Even with meager fifth-gear torque, the 914 feels far more planted when its throttle is down. The other thing I notice is I'm not nearly as fatigued as yesterday. Instead, I'm having *fun*. Yesterday, I was dreading qualifying and the race. Now, I can't wait for them. Another chance to digest what I've learned, another night of sleep, another day in a great Porsche...

Then, coming onto the front straight in fifth gear, something awful happens. The power dies. Instinctively, I stab the clutch, then look at the dash. What I don't want to see is there: the little yellow oil-pressure light is on. As I kill the ignition, the cabin fills with smoke. *Hopefully, the car is okay*, I think as I coast into the infield grass near Turn 1. *I guess it'd be nice if I'm not on fire, too*. After 18 years in Porsches, I've never

lost a motor, but, after rolling to a stop, a check of the rearview mirror reveals an oil-slicked rear window. It can't be good.

It isn't. After a long tow back, Don finds that a connecting rod went through the crankcase. The motor is done. I feel awful. Mentally, I review the session. Did I over-rev on a downshift? No, of that much I'm sure. Did I exceed 7800 rpm under load? *Maybe* in the infield. After apologizing and wiping lots of oil off with Patti and Tom, I've done all I can and leave the Brumos tent.

As I walk through the Fan Zone, a guy in a tie-dyed T-shirt points at me and says, "There's the guy who blew the Brumos 914 up!" I keep moving. *Editor Attacks Race Fan* won't make a good headline. Out of a desire to assess or assuage my guilt, I consult several mechanics. All say the same thing: If I had exceeded redline on the way up, valves would have floated first. I'm still trying to clear my conscience when I notice that I've got a voicemail.

"Petey baby!" says digitized Don. "I'm gonna put you in the Supercar. Run it in the one o'clock deal with the rest of the

PHOTOS 1 & 3 PATTI TANTILLO, PHOTO 2 BOB CHAPMAN, PHOTO 4 GERRY BURGER

cars so you can get used to it out there. C'mon back and see us — we got you a car!" When I get there, Don tells me the 2.5 in the 914-6 had been together a long time, and that he wants to put me in the 964 Turbo for Sunday's qualifying and race. He figures Exhibition laps are a good way for me to learn the car first.

As I suit up, Don tells me his sister, Debbie, will be riding with me. Waiting on the grid, I learn she and Don have only known one another for two years. Separated at birth, they were adopted into different families. After tracking Don down, she met him at Barber Motorsports Park. Bob Snodgrass adopted her immediately, having

Bright and early Sunday morning, I'm in a good mood. I feel bad about the 914, knowing it won't be a cheap fix. But its flat six *could* have let go on Friday, leaving me with disappointment — partly in the car, but mostly in myself. Instead, I got 25 great minutes at Daytona in a very special Porsche. Whatever happens today, I am thankful.

At the track, Don says he knows why the Turbo pulled to the left. With its tires swapped side to side, it pulled to the right. Its special Goodyears are shot. "I'm sorry. We'd like to put you in it, but can't get tires." Thus, my only driving today will be in the Exhibition. It should be interesting, as I'll drive Helmuth Bott's 959 prototype, replete

grass credit for the fact he can drive — and walk. It was Bob who arranged to get his family to Florida after the accident, and it was Bob who sent specialists to keep him from ending up in a wheelchair for life.

As Debbie and I talk about life outside of cars, it hits me. Bob had a hand in something else in my life. My conversation with him before 2001's Rennsport planted more than the seed for this weekend. Because of it, I was carrying a helmet bag on the flight east — an odd black bag that prompted the woman seated next to me to start a conversation. I would end up marrying her.

The more others tell me about Bob, the more I understand why so many good people are under this awning. Why the interaction between Andy, Don, Speedy, Patti, and Paul is so special. Why the whole team's bond is so strong. It's because these roots run deep. Bill Bencker's daughter, Toni Russ, is one more part of the family, having worked for Brumos off and on for 20 years. So is Porsche's Alwin Springer, who seems at home in the lounge, engrossed in a conversation with three major players when I enter to change into street clothes.

As I change, Alwin is saying things he shouldn't around the media. When I rib him, he shoots back. "Do you think I don't *know* you are standing there?" He grins, then introduces me to the others. One is Mike Colucci, who runs Brumos' Grand-Am team. Mike was a childhood friend of Snodgrass. It's one more multi-decade relationship Bob turned into something fruitful.

And, of course, there's Hurley. Brought on just before Bob appeared, Hurley has been with Brumos for 36 years. I've only known him since 1995. He was the first "Porsche person" to welcome me into the larger Porsche family, and it's Hurley who ultimately invited me into the Brumos family. I'm not quite sure how to thank him, but the good thing is Hurley can be short on words himself, so I know he knows.

Leaving, I realize why Bob might have liked Sorrento's so much. It's the same reason this team is the way it is, and the same reason Brumos is the way it is. I think Bob liked Sorrento's because it's a family business, the kind that keeps a family together for a long, long time. More than anything else I've learned about him this weekend, I've learned Bob valued continuity. In an ephemeral world, he took the long view.

Bob knew continuity lays a foundation nothing else can, a foundation to do great things, big and small. It's been said Bob liked to do things for people. It's clear he did. It's also been said he was fond of saying, "I'd rather have you owe me than pay me." I'm sure a lot of people owe you, Bob. I'm glad to count myself among them. ■



her name painted on the race car's roof. Debbie decided to leave a good life in Alabama to move to Jacksonville, buying a house across the street from Don. Says Don: "I went a lot of years without knowing her. Now I see her every day."

What I think will be mild parade laps is instead 140+mph fun, and the 964 is a *big* upgrade. 20 years, a turbo 3.3, real brakes, power steering, and good aero add up to a world of difference. At 140, the Turbo feels like a Cayenne on the freeway. And the sights we see, such as following an RSR 2.1 Turbo and 935-001 on the banking, are no bad thing. Back in the paddock, Debbie is ebullient. I am, too. I rave about the 964, my only concern being alignment. Leaving the pits, the car pulled hard to the left.

"I'll check that out," says Don. "And I'll see what I can do about getting you in that car tomorrow. I want you in it." When my head hits the pillow that night, any residual feelings of guilt are fading fast. I'm excited about the possibility of racing the Turbo. Trepidation creeps in, as it's double the power and rear-engined, but not enough to keep me from a deep sleep...

Left to right: Speedy Gonzalez and Mike Thompson crouching in front of Patti Tantillo, Don Leatherwood, Hurley Haywood, Bill Bencker, Toni Russ, Andy Chapman, Paul Powell, Pete Stout, Skip Gwinn, Tom Seabolt Jr., and Brumos owner Dan Davis.

with 928-era checkered cloth. As Patti and I drive on grid, James Redman walks over.

"You know, the Exhibition is for race cars only," he says, crouching by my window. "Just pull in behind that GT3. Try to act like a pace car." I never thought I'd do a walk of shame in a 959, but Patti and I smile when we notice fans taking more pictures of the 959 than many of the race cars. Something about the 959 speaks to them, yet it's a 914 I'm longing for. As you'd expect of a street car, the 959 feels soft. Everywhere. After watching a 911R drift precariously past a tire wall one too many times, I pass. The 959's torque makes it easy work.

Brumos' paddock is buzzing when we get back. Chad McQueen was driving the Brumos RSR. This weekend is his first time on track since an accident here in 2006 that left him gravely injured. He gives Snod-