

The 25 Hours of Thunderhill
A Wonderful Adventure in Motorsport
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For: The Wheel



It was a dream come true. A very quick car, a capable and friendly team, and an invitation to drive the NASA 25 Hours of Thunderhill. I didn't think twice before saying yes.

Two months out, the intimidation began. Was I in shape for 6-7 hours behind the wheel with 70 others, including the hired gun pros? So my bicycle rides and Bowflex sessions gained a purpose. My pride had a lot to do with it...I certainly did not want to let the team down, so ride I did. One of my HOD customers, John pushed me...early morning to the ranger station on Mt. Diablo, then over the back side and around back home...I hadn't even considered this ride two months earlier – but this was serious. Asleep at the wheel in Turn 8 at 2:00am I did not want to be.

The team reported back that the thousands of hours of work on the car were paying off. While Prototype Development Group, as a race team, was very capable, they tended to avoid using money as the solution to getting better. The brakes, found to be a weak spot, got a brake fluid recirculation system. The gearbox, a stock Porsche 993 donor, got a gear oil pump to keep her cool. A new steering wheel was installed to avoid the need for a death grip. They stepped to the plate to build a tire – both rain and dry – inventory that would prevent any compromise in driving. Then, the real surprise to me - the assembly of an amazing group of very capable volunteers, AND the organization of this team, down to what kind of soup we were eating on Sunday, and who was making it.

The final week before the race my wife had to put up with my total preoccupation and nerves – she was a saint to not complain. But soon enough, it was race weekend, and what conditioning I'd done would have to be enough. We were going to get this over with...the doubts crept in – the Muscle Milk Daytona Prototype and Lola sports racer showed up...yikes, you're kidding me.

But then the strength of the PDG team started to have an effect. The raw energy and enthusiasm, the confidence in our team of drivers, the pride of being there, all started to rub off. Meeting the other 3 drivers for the first time helped a lot – they’re very cool and no one seems to have an ego – just the desire to drive this beast as much as possible and do well for our owners. Then the PDG boss, Richard announces that I am to qualify the car – a real honor, and it is to be my first competitive laps in the dark – yes, qualifying in the dark. The plan is to save the car, go out and warm it up, cut a couple of good laps and park it. This wasn’t the race. With many of the cars already on course practicing, the clock strikes qualifying hour, I strap in and hit the track. This was a very humble moment for me. I know Thunderhill like the back of my hand. I had even been able to sneak a half-dozen laps in the dark a few weeks before – by myself on track – and that was a piece of cake. Add the Turn 5 bypass to which I am a newbie, 68 other cars – and this session was a real test for me. The prototype I’m driving had no rear view mirror, just the fender mirrors, ala a formula car. And everyone on track has mounted their version of killer lighting systems. But I was going to be one of the fastest cars on track, so it wasn’t really going to be a big deal, right? Wrong – man, it was like Star Wars out there. Lights appearing in the mirrors sometimes were paddock lights, team spot lights, camera flashes, lights designating worker positions, and of course, some were the lights of the other cars. Spotters really couldn’t help now – you’re doing 110 approaching Turn 8 and there are green lights behind me. Is this a DP car that is 10 seconds a lap faster than me, or am I stroking it and being caught by a Miller Mustang? For the first 5 laps, the rest of the cars simply have to live with my learning experience. I’m trying to be predicable, but also focus on the task at hand. Heat up the tires and brakes and get a clean lap in. Lap times start coming in – ouch...2:01...7 seconds slower than practice in the daytime. Then a 2:00...then a lap where I have to weave my way through some very fast Miata traffic that were in a pitched battle catching air at the Bypass. Then, even after slamming on the brakes at the apex of Turn 7, Ted comes on the radio to report a 1:56.7. I can tell that I haven’t overwhelmed them with an amazing performance...next lap, more traffic, and I start getting frustrated. Then the word comes on the Motorola – pit now, we’ll take the 56 and park it. Man, if I could only get a clean lap...I’m starting to figure out the whole light show thing and getting confident...nope – pit it is. Then we watch the final grid form and it dawns on me that the darkness, vision issues, and traffic are factors for ALL the others as well...we are 5th on the grid of 70 cars...ok – close to what the goal was and we were ahead of most of the cars that we’re supposed to be ahead of.

Immediately the team goes to work on my confidence level by congratulating me and then begins the final prep on the #4 for the battle that is at hand. Another restless night, a few hours of sleep, but we’re on our way now and the light is literally at the end of the tunnel.

For the race start, Keith Drake, the most experienced Enduro driver on the team is the perfect choice to lead off – Mr. Cool gets a perfect start and settles in to a comfortable pace. This event is part race, part poker game. We want the competition to know that we are fast and they must push their pace, but we need to save at least 10%, not only to get to the finish, and to be able to crank it up at the end when it counts.

Chris Durbin, accustomed to V8 muscle with his American Iron car from PA, hops in second as the PDG team is performing flawlessly. Crisp fueling process, driver change with no issues – he’s off and puts in another stellar stint.

Mikah Barnett is next – an experienced T1 Corvette racer, the LS-1 out back must sound like home to him....things continue to go well as Mikah is pounding out the laps, but wait – tire down – Car #4 pitting now! Ouch, he’s in with a concern about the rear suspension and a tire down. And I throw on my gear quickly to be ready for the stop....Mikah out, David in. Left rear wheel/tire being replaced, no big deal....just as they’re about to drop the car, there is more study. Everyone is calling to get me out of the pits....crew chief sticks his head in the car window and says, “The shock mount is bent, but we think we got it straightened back out.” Go, Go, Go....We’re off to do battle into the darkness once again – only this is it...what I’ve been anticipating for 2 months...just keep your cool and click off laps. Oh yeah, we have a new set of stickers and they’re slick as greased lightning...hang on...let some slower cars by...wait a minute, that jerk is 5 seconds a lap slower than me and now he’s blocking me....that does it – focus sets in, eyes adjusted... pick your spots...say adios turkey! Car starts to settle in as the tires heat up...but man, the car is really pushing...have to live by our HOD mantra...”in slow, out fast,” and it works in this car. This is the first time I’ve ever been the one with the horsepower, so let’s use it...but it’s getting worse. Then – the fog – serious fog – begins to accumulate on top of the WORST place on the course – the bypass. Yikes, now the abyss has become hidden by a white sheet. I wish for a foot switch to dim my brights like on Dad’s Riviera. The back side of the course deteriorates as well. This is getting VERY dicey. One thing becomes clear – another HOD mantra “Eyes UP!” becomes a survival technique....You have to peer into the darkness waiting to see any reference point, a white curb, a reflector dot – whatever, but then you make your turn with your eyes way out ahead to find your next visual cue. This would be a great exercise for new drivers to force them to look ahead....then again...maybe not. This is not an event for a rookie driver of any kind.

Starting to wonder how much worse the fog will get, I’ve settled in to a reasonable pace and ride hard over the bypass when, landing on the back side, there is a clank, snap, jingle sound from the left rear. That’s probably not good. I report in, not being a mechanic, but instinctually knowing that the shock mount has failed. They confirm receipt of the message, then silence. Maybe, the maybe the lack of damping in the rear could have something to do with the understeer? The yellow flag comes out – thank goodness – the stewards catch the fog condition just in time. Pace laps follow, which started to get dicey, as the fog gets thicker. The red light is on in Turn 14, indicating that the pits are closed. Keep cool, David. Then Rich comes on the radio, “David we want you to pit and drive straight to the back paddock to our trailer.” I say, “But the pits are closed.” They say, “Go straight to back paddock.” I say, “Confirm, BLOW the red light at pit entry and drive to back paddock.” They confirm, “Blow the red light and come in.” So we bring #4 in and drive straight to the trailer where the whole team converges on the car. Seems the owner’s wife Yvonne’s car has already surrendered the shock mount we need and is on jack stands. This is Roger Penske stuff, folks – maybe with a few less bucks. Then the red flag goes out, but the team leaders have read the rule book, which saves our race. It seems that if you go to the paddock and begin working on your car under a yellow flag, and a red flag comes out, you may continue to work on your car. Joy in Fogville, the shock mount is replaced and the car is completely checked over – but no fueling takes place, which would have been illegal. Knowing this wrinkle in the rulebook (not SCCA rules) and having the part ready saved the entire PDG effort.



With the red flag shutting down all the other running cars on the main straight, the officials declare a fog hold with hourly updates to take place on any progress toward safe racing.

An eerie late night...cars on the main straight shrouded in fog, covered, awaiting battle....a truly weird sight and sensation. The track goes quiet...teams winding down from the fury of the race....bright paddock lights obscured by the mist makes the place look like a motorsports ghost town.

4:22am, my cell phone rings: "The race is green at 5:00am and we want you to finish your stint!" Yvonne announces. I'm in my suit in 90 seconds and on the way out of the Golden Pheasant in another 60. Jeez....Highway 162 is barely visible....the drive TO the racetrack is scary...great....We're really gonna do this? Hop in the car – no time to spare. Warm her up, line up in the hot pit lane, having lost ONE lap for the repair.....a racing miracle. We get on track and the stewards have once again made the right move...we can see. We can race. Green flag. Now we put the excuses behind – the tires are scrubbed, and the car is handling like the sweetheart I had known. This next hour is one of the most amazing of my 24 years of racing. Rhythm sets in. Confidence sets in. The car is a blast. I know the 3 or 4 cars to look out for and other than that, my job is to move through traffic safely. And the car clicks off the laps as other cars begin their own odysseys. The Porvette (Porsche with Vette power) breaks, the killer pro-built tuner Vette has problems...one at a time, the consistent strong pace of the GTM takes its toll and people start noticing. They call me in for fuel and driver change and there is an unbelievable sense of accomplishment for the team...and my relief that I didn't screw it up. Keith stands ready in the pits and I jump out with #4 in 2nd overall. Fans of the team watching the scoring on the net live are having a conniption...and we're very proud. Keith drives away

into the pre-dawn and the owner Richard mentions that we're now where none of us have been before.

Keith brings her home after a solid stint, but is concerned about a vibration. Mikah hops in while the crew thoroughly checks bearings, lugs, everything that they can think of...nothing is obvious, so Mikah hits the track...running well until another flat hits him – I fear that a close call I'd had created a flat spot that Keith had felt and that became the flat....Mikah does a great job bringing her in without damage to the body, but we lose precious time on track and our pit sequence is now really off plan. Chris steps in for the next run and hammers away – both of these young bucks have no problem keeping a quick pace – if anything the team holds them back a bit...then concerns about the linkage for 3rd gear come in and we decide to go conservative, running the 3.0 mile Thunderhill course in just 4th and 5th gears.

We've now had our fair share of issues, but hold a very respectable 3rd place in class and remain top ten overall. Then we hear a popping and cracking LS-1 followed by Chris' call that voltage is down. Alternator is not charging. It gets worse. This PDG team is not fazed. Spare batteries at the ready, the first of three replacements occur – a 2.5 minute battery change including removal of the front body...professional level work.

While we're a bit battered and bruised, the team's spirits are high – we've run clean – just a bump here and there – and we're in a podium position. Don, a key crew member comes to me and makes it clear that a podium is a LOT better than 47th, which is what we'd get if we lost the car. Message is received. Save the car. I hop in for what is hoped to be the final run to the checkered – a three hour stint with only a splash of gas. New battery once again in place, we do car management. Run the diff cooler for two laps. Turn it off. Run the brakes fan for two laps. Turn it off. Left tank. Right tank. Read the gauges. And run a consistent, respectable lap in 4th and 5th. This car is awesome. We can do that without breaking a sweat. My bike rides with John on the mountain pay off. Relaxed, the miles and laps click away...50 minutes left – voltage is down to 8 and the engine breakup begins again. We need gas anyway – time to come in. And without hesitation, we do a driver swap to give young Chris the wheel to the end. New battery once again in place – Chris drives a flawless last stint to the checkered. One key nemesis breaks 20 minutes short, moving us to 2nd in a very fast ES class. The team is ecstatic. What motorsports is all about comes clear. Competitors one minute, mutual congratulators the next hugging up and down the pit wall – EVERYONE is proud of their relative accomplishments. Yes, there are a few cars already in trailers on the way home, but rest assured, most of them will be back.

My experience with the Prototype Development Group in the 2008 25 Hours of Thunderhill will be savored as a highlight of my racing memories. This is a group of quality people, with an amazing passion for their sport, awesome expertise to build and fix, and a real sense of family. When it was all done, Richard the owner asked me, "Well, did you have fun David?" He asking me that question said it all. My answer was an unqualified "YES!" This is the greatest sport I could imagine. With this memory and very respectable finish, the entire team has committed to taking another shot at the prize in 2009.

