

# Project 911S

## Part 21: A day of redemption

By Mitchell Sam Rossi

PHOTOS BY LES BIDRAWN

**R**edemption! Salvation! Hallelujah! Oh, how good it feels! In the last dispatch about the project car, I had to confess to managing only a time of 1.38 around the formidable "Big Track" at Willow Springs International Raceway in Rosamond, Calif.

But now, 1.28:34. Oh, yeah! You read right. One minute-twenty-eight-point-three-four seconds. The little S can hold its headlights high. It

ing Wagner the keys to the project car.

Luckily, the weekend I decided to jump back into cup racing after a 3-year hiatus corresponded with the Porsche Owners Club's annual running of the Tribute to Le Mans, a 4-hour day-into-night endurance race. This celebrated event, covered by SpeedChannel and the local news agencies, not only brings out some of the best Porsche club drivers from across the country, but



did it, it cracked the 1.30 barrier. The car has been absolved! Unfortunately, I wasn't behind the wheel.

No, in order to freeze the clock that quickly with an RS-bodied 911 pushed by a humble 2.7-liter mechanically fuel-injected motor, you have to turn to someone with a lot more experience at flinging race cars about the pavement. You have to turn to a pro, say, someone like Porsche Cup champion and current Ferrari driver Cort Wagner.

Teaming with fellow Porsche Cup winner Kevin Buckler and The Racer's Group team, Wagner returned to the American Le Mans Series where, in 1999, he captured the GT Class title. Wagner's resume goes on to list wins at the 24 Hours of Daytona, the 12 Hours of Sebring, pole position at Le Mans, the 1999 USRRC championship and, in 2002, the Grand-Am GT crown. Safe to say, I felt pretty confident hand-

ing Wagner the keys to the project car.

The Tribute weekend is a 3-day extravaganza with Friday practice sessions for the cup racers and night testing for the enduro runners. Saturday opens with more practice for both groups, a qualifying sprint for the next day's cup race and, at the 6 o'clock hour, the start of the demonic sunset-into-darkness contest.

Throughout Friday's practice sessions I was still stuck in the high 1.38s. On paper, the project car had the potential to run amidst the top contenders in its V3 classification, most of whom were running 90 sec. a lap. Although the Pirelli racing slicks were holding the car to the pavement like molasses, I was apparently using the right pedal too sparingly and the center one too much.

Mind you, the 1:38 at the Big Track is nothing to be ashamed of in certain class cars, but as the S was constructed with some of the best facto-

ry and aftermarket equipment available, an injustice was clearly being done.

To put my lap times into perspective, currently the fastest V3 car in the POC is an RSR-bodied 911 with a stock 3.2-liter Motronic motor. Owned and driven by Kevin Roush of GAS Motorsports in Upland, Calif., it holds a track record of 1:27:7. That is an 11-sec. difference. It doesn't look like much in print, but by the end of a 30-min. cup race, such a deficit would amount to the S being lapped...twice.

Clearly I was still wary of testing the car's limits. How deep could I carry speed into the corners, how forgiving were the Pirellis, how well would the high rear wing keep the back end in line with the front? Two ways to find out. Either take to the track and keep ratcheting up the speed until the car's lateral forces bettered the frictional grip of the tires, in which case I would be contemplating its thresholds from the gravel pit, or I could let someone else take the car out and do the same thing.

Josh Alvarez, one of the young race technicians at Randall Aase Motors, the camp which keeps the car's 2.7-liter running smoothly, races a bright yellow 1970 911S in the H production class. Although impaired with a stock 2.2-liter MFI engine, a single-bladed whale-tail wing and skinny 7x15-in. Fuchs wheels encased in 225/50VR15 Kumho tires, Alvarez manages to hurl himself around the circuit in the mid-1.33s. Some people just have the gift of car control. I think Alvarez has the added benefit of foolish youth on his side. The two traits certainly magnify one another.

Strapped in the right seat of the project car with Alvarez behind the wheel was an enlightening experience. Ter-rifying, but enlightening. His braking points were so deep, I wondered if he was ever going to touch the pedal. Heading into turn two, a particularly unnerving 180-degree corner, he never applied the calipers but simply lifted off the accelerator, let the suspension settle and then slammed the throttle once again. After five laps, we cruised into the pits with the dash-mounted lap timer verifying a 1:33:15.

Alvarez was pleased. He had gone easy with the car and, of course, was carrying an extra 200 lb in the second Sparco seat. As for me, someone had to pry my fingers off the rollcage before I could climb out.

But how fast was the car? The complete package. After all, that was what the project series was about—not how bad a driver I was but how quick was this early 911S equipped with latest components. Enter Cort Wagner.

I found Wagner with the Aase Performance



race team scrutinizing the blue 996 GT3-RS he was sharing with avid club- and pro-racer Brent Martini. (Yes, that's his name. Martini. And yes, his GT3 sports the famed Martini & Rossi racing colors as well, just not as blatantly as the project car.) Wagner and Martini were here to take another stab at the Tribute, having had to settle for the second spot on last year's podium, never a welcomed position for a champion.

We are old chums, Cort and I. Our friendship goes back at least 6 months, so after re-introducing myself, I had no trepidation asking him the favor of taking the S out for a few quick laps. Wagner was more than happy to oblige.

Slipping behind the wheel, he immediately set about the task at hand. He pressed himself deep into the seat, worked the belts tight, and snapped the shifter through the gates. Always quick with a smile in the paddock, Wagner was all business in the cockpit. He shot a few questions through the window. At what rpm did I shift? At the red paint? Okay. What was the oil temp running at? What brakes were on the car? What did it weigh? And so on.

Here was the difference between most weekend racers and a professional driver. Although seated in a 33-year-old 911 that was merely pretending to be a real race car, Wagner took his job very seriously. The S could very well have been a GT3-RS or a competition-prepared 360 Modena. It didn't matter. Wagner was going testing. He was going to work.

Out of the pits and into turn one, Wagner immediately began working heat into the slicks. By the time he was leaving the apex of turn three and climbing the hill onto the right-hand omega of turn four, the Pirellis were responding to his demands.

Through the downhill dip of turn five, the unsettling hump of six, and around the annoying kink labeled turn seven, the Porsche champion was asking everything of the project car. You could hear it across the flickering, hot desert air. Wagner had the throttle plates standing on end as he entered turn eight, a high-speed sweeper and the very reason the Big Track intimidates most drivers.

A slight lift of the accelerator at the entrance of nine, and it was full tilt again. From the pit wall the S could be seen drifting out of the apex flat and sure. At the outer edge of the front straightaway, where the pavement met the desert, Wagner sent dust devils scurrying on every pass.

Into the hard left-hander of turn one, the brake lights barely flickered and never before the second marker. Turn two was taken as close to full

throttle as possible, with Wagner playing the steering wheel to keep the car's balance on the sharpest edge.

After a few more laps, Wagner brought the S back to the Aase Performance pits. "What a great little car," he said, flicking off the belts. "It's really sorted out nicely."

I had a dozen questions, but knowing the lap times he had just accomplished, it was difficult to talk with such a large grin plastered across my face. "It was very neutral, very predictable," he continued. I continued to grin.

"It shifted nice and pulled nice. It reminded me of a Formula Ford, because it was so undermotored." Okay, my grin faded a little, but then the guy's weekend ride was a GT3-RS with 415 bhp. "Part of the reason why it handles so well is because it doesn't have any horsepower, I mean, relatively."

The grin was definitely falling. I asked for suggestions to improve it.

"I would take some wing out of the back and see if it stays neutral. That might speed it up a little bit," Wagner recommended. He noted that was a change for Willow Springs. For low-grip tracks like Laguna Seca, he suggested keeping the wing angle and possibly adding a splitter to the RSR front spoiler.

"I'm nearly flat out everywhere, and that is really fun," Wagner said enthusiastically. "There's an easy .27 in it. Maybe a 1.26." My grin returned, big time.

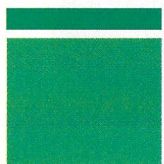
Ah, redemption. The car had it, and by Sunday afternoon I had it, too, managing to turn consistent laps in the low 1.33s. Wagner actually earned some redemption as well. At the end of the 4-hour endurance race, he and Martini stood atop the winner's podium, taking the checkered flag after a grueling 158 laps, their fastest being a 1.21:29. Dare I say, not a bad weekend for Martini & Rossi.

Lesson learned? This was not about being taught a better driving technique or the correct line around Willow. This was about learning to trust the equipment. Watching Wagner's five laps built my confidence tenfold, and I was not even in the car.

Of course, now the time has come to work on technique. After all, I have a 1.30 barrier to break. ❧

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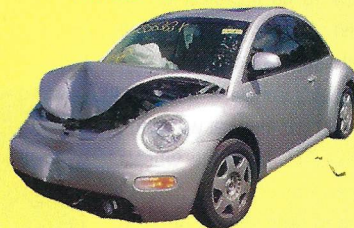
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