

NOT

ACCORDING TO PLAN

ROLEX 24 DELIVERS TOUGH LESSONS TO 963 TEAMS.

STORY BY RYAN CARIGNAN

PHOTOS BY PORSCHE MOTORSPORTS & DEREMER STUDIOS





The 2023 Rolex 24 at Daytona was a staggering success for IMSA, but not for one of its

most storied marques. Although Porsche failed to add to its record number of wins in its return to prototype racing, all is not lost. ♦ Let's rewind about two years to when IMSA and the Automobile Club de l'Ouest (ACO) created the Le Mans Daytona hybrid (LMDh) category. Teams can now race for the overall win at the Rolex 24 at Daytona, 12 Hours of Sebring, and the fabled 24 Hours of Le Mans in the same year with the same car. For the first time in a generation, IMSA's premier cars will compete on both sides of the Atlantic.

Acura, BMW, Cadillac, and Porsche all threw their hats in the ring to compete in the LMDh class (Lamborghini will debut its car in 2024). IMSA rebranded it as the Grand Touring Prototype (GTP), resurrecting a name from the glory days of turbo-powered, fire-spitting rockets with wheels from the 1980s and '90s.

Creating Porsche Penske Motorsport (PPM) to field two Porsche 963 prototypes in IMSA and two more for the World Endurance Championship (WEC) season made perfect sense. Porsche and Penske are synonymous with winning in the 917/10, the "Turbopanzer" 917/30, and most recently in the open-cockpit RS Spyder in the 2000s.

With a blue-chip pedigree and several months' head start on the competition, it was no surprise that all eyes were on Porsche as the 2023 Rolex 24 at Daytona approached. No pressure; they were racing a new car with several spec components

made by third-party manufacturers, with new rules and new tire compounds that weren't available for much of testing and development. No problem.

PROBLEM. ANYONE AT the Daytona International Speedway this January should have learned one thing: Do not play poker with the people running a GTP-class team. Every team doubted how their car would perform over 24 hours in race conditions, but everyone said the right thing, and no one's face showed obvious tells. Too many components were new, relatively untested, and hadn't seen race conditions. Roger Penske joked that the team had more engineers looking at computers than people working on the car. He wasn't wrong. Tension filled the paddock.

Endurance racing is full of unknowns, from weather to track conditions to what bonehead decision will be made at 3 a.m. by an amateur

driver who financed their way into the race. Or what questionable move a pro driver who's far too eager to hold or regain a position when ten hours of racing remain might make. Unknowns are what endurance racing is all about, but when the biggest unknown is your car, that makes for some sleepless nights.

During the annual practice and qualifying session held one week before the race, the Roar Before the Rolex 24, Porsche looked to be in an excellent position. Felipe Nasr qualified the No. 7 car second overall, a few tenths off the pole-sitting Acura, while the No. 6 car showed top pace for much of the weekend before having an off in the Le Mans Chicane (bus stop) during qualifying. The damage ended the qualifying run and put the car at the tail end of the GTP field, but it didn't appear serious.

Neither car took advantage of all the track time during race-week

The hybrid system gets headlines, but the heart of the 963 is a twin-turbo 4.6-liter V8, 80% of which comes from the 918 Spyder supercar, which was based architecturally on the 3.4-liter V8 from the Porsche RS Spyder.



The 963s were mad fast, and the drivers could reliably put down some of the fastest laps in class.



practice sessions on Thursday or Friday. Some of this was strategic, some due to chasing gremlins. Thankfully, most of the gremlins appeared to be the garden-variety racing issues, such as power steering, wheel bearings, radio problems, etc.

AFTER TALKING WITH the drivers and team chiefs, it was clear there was one thing they were not concerned with: speed. The 963s were mad fast, and the drivers could reliably put down some of the fastest laps in class. What they needed clarification on was how the tires would last.

Jonathan Diuguid, managing director of Porsche Penske Motorsport, was happy with the cars' performance leading to the race's start. "We are confident but cautious. Nothing in practice has made us change our plan, and our strategy is solid," Diuguid said.

Teamwork was a clear tenet of

Porsche Penske Motorsport leading up to the race. Unlike many two-car teams under the same management, transparency was a focus. All six drivers relayed what they saw or felt in the car after each stint, crew members helped position equipment, tires, and fuel behind the pit wall, and the engineers ensured everyone had the correct information. That dynamic may change as the program matures, but everyone was all-in for a PPM win at Daytona, regardless of the number on the car. They were ready to race.

As the cars rocketed through the Daytona tri-oval toward the waving green flag, the teams sat stone-faced in the pit, ready to deal with whatever fate had in store. One team wouldn't have to wait long for an answer.

THE FIRST FEW hours of the race went as planned, and the two Por-

sches held firm within the top five positions, often battling for the lead with the Acuras and Cadillacs. The BMW entries were off the pace and never in contention for a win, with one suffering a failure of the Motor Generating Unit (MGU) early on.

The No. 7 car, driven by Matt Campbell, Nasr, and Michael Christensen, was the first to deal with adversity five hours into the race. The car lost all drive systems and shut down after hard braking entering turn three. Nasr refired the engine and hybrid system and returned to racing, only to have the problem occur again the next lap, forcing him into the garage. The car suffered a failure of the Williams Advanced Engineering-supplied energy storage system (battery), requiring a replacement.

During test sessions before the race, manufacturers quoted this swap to need between 45 and 60

minutes, not counting the time needed to get the car off the track and into the garage. The crew accomplished it in an astounding 22 minutes and had the car back on track 35 minutes from when it left. Despite this tremendous effort, the team was 22 laps down, and hopes for victory were over.

As the crew returned to the pit box, a look of pride, amazement and relief washed over them all. A well-deserved round of high-fives and hugs rippled through the Penske pit. The team might not be able to win the race, but they did what few outsiders thought they could.

With the No. 7 car out of contention, hopes for a victory lay solely on the No. 6 car driven by Nick Tandy, Mathieu Jaminet, and Dane Cameron. The car led the race a few times and was always in the hunt, rarely more than a few seconds behind the leading Cadil-

The GTP manufacturers have taken unique approaches to design within the mandated rules, as seen in the very different "faces" of the Porsche with its low and wide headlights, which is in contrast to the Cadillac's vertical approach (opposite, middle).



The resulting delays meant the car returned to the track four laps back from the leaders. Everyone on the team looked absolutely gut-punched, none more than Tandy.

lac or Acura. The team did its part recording lap after lap matching or just a few tenths behind the leader throughout the race.

AS THE NIGHT wore on, it was clear the Michelins were going to hold up; the Porsches were fast, the Cadillacs were aggressive, and they were all chasing the Acuras. The No. 60 Meyer Shank Racing Acura (eventual race winner), to be specific. The car could lead the race, seemingly, at will. Even with a few pit-stop delays to service oil, they were the team to beat.

Crafty driving and excellent strategy had the No. 6 Porsche right on the heels of the Acura until about 5 a.m. Driving in second place overall, Tandy swerved left to avoid a slow LMP3 car going through turn four (the Kink). In doing so, the left side tires struck the inside curbing, sending him spinning off track

through the infield grass.

The off-road excursion bounced the car about, heavily damaging the tail end. Fortunately, the incident happened just a few laps ahead of a planned pit stop and driver change, so when Tandy returned to the pits, the crew was ready to swap tires, driver, and body panels in a flurry of activity. The team had difficulty attaching the new rear section and had to remove and reseal the engine cover to get everything to fit together. The resulting delays meant the car returned to the track four laps back from the leaders. Everyone on the team looked absolutely gut-punched, none more than Tandy.

Guided by Jaminet and Cameron, the No. 6 car continued its assault, consistently matching the leader's lap times, and eventually regained a lap. On his subsequent turn in the car, Tandy put on a driving display that people should speak of

in hushed tones for years to come. He was faster than the leaders and reeled in the top pack on track. A full-course-yellow gifted the team a lap back, then Tandy secured another by driving past the top three GTP cars on the restart and gapping them by more than 30 car lengths. Tandy achieved these feats with many of the dash displays not functioning, robbing him of critical information.

THE NEXT TIME a caution flag flew, the Porsche would be granted a wave-by and be back on the lead lap. The pit box buzzed with excitement as everyone watched the tremendous display. At this point in the race, cautions were becoming a regular thing, and the team knew it wouldn't be long before they were back in the fight.

Then the car shut down and went into neutral after hard braking entering turn one. The monitors in-

side the Penske pit displayed a stationary Porsche in the overrun, and everyone froze. Tandy quickly got it refired and attacked the track, only to have the same thing happen the next time he entered turn one. With the car limping and smoke pouring from the rear end, the crew instructed Tandy to shut off the engine and hybrid unit and cruise back to the pits on electric drive only. The team didn't take long to direct the car to the garage, where it would remain. After overcoming so much, a failure of the spec GTP class gearbox ended the race for the team, ruining a stunning effort and ending Porsche Penske Motorsport's chance for victory with a little over two hours left.

To say the results were not what PPM expected would be an understatement. The challenge was great, but these organizations do not do things to finish; they do them to win. The Porsche faithful can take heart



EVAN CARIGNAN

knowing that the lessons learned from Daytona will undoubtedly lead to improvements when they race again in the Mobil 1 Twelve Hours of Sebring in March. Sebring will present unique challenges with its

infamous bumps torturing the cars and drivers every lap. The teams will be ready, and judging by the record number of fans at Daytona, IMSA will write another chapter in the new "golden era" of racing. 🏁



Nighttime at the Rolex 24 at Daytona is a feast for the eyes as colors explode from the lights on the cars and the infield Ferris wheel. The nose of the No. 6 car (opposite) shows the abuse of 16 hours of racing and a spin through the grass.