





# LAPS OF AMERICA

ONE COUNTRY, TWO PALS,  
THOUSANDS OF MILES, AND  
A PORSCHE. TWICE.

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**TO UNDERSTAND THE LUNACY** of this adventure, you have to go back in time. Picture a small boy of two years sitting on the lap of an elegant young woman. The place is Vienna, Austria, and the year is 1951. The small boy is none other than Niki Lauda, who would grow up to become a three-time Formula 1 driving champion. The woman is my grandmother, who was a close friend of Lauda's mother.

Is it possible that Lauda's personal aura and fascination with automobiles rubbed off on me? Unlikely. Maybe it was my Onkel Uwe, who worked for many decades in Zuffenhausen at Porsche as an engineer? That seems more plausible, but who knows? All that's certain is that I've owned every series of Porsche (except the 903) at least twice, starting with a silver 1980 Porsche 911 SC that I drove around New York City and raced at Bridgehampton. At the time, I lived in a walk-up, one-room Manhattan apartment not much bigger than the garage across the street where I kept the car.





PHOTO: COREY DAVIS



**Above:** The Carrera GT after a 174-mph altitude test at the airport in Telluride, Colorado. Gregor Tarjan and Mike Danner shared the cockpit for up to 16 hours during both One Laps—smiling all along.

**Below:** In good old-fashioned bracket racing at North Star Dragway in Denton, Texas, the Carrera GT takes on a Ford Crown Victoria Police Interceptor.

Does all of this somehow show a pathological addiction to the Porsche brand? Surely it illustrates my passion for cars that are finely tuned, purpose-built machines that can be used as daily drivers no matter the budget. I also have a fascination with long-distance driving, which might come from the unforgettable drives I shared with my wife Flo as we toured Europe in that same silver 911 SC during the years we lived in Austria, especially our drives across the snow-covered Alps.

This whole idea started with the burning urge to participate in the world's coolest endurance-type motorsports events. My ambitious list included the Carrera Panamericana, Le Mans Classic, Pikes Peak International Hill Climb, Targa Newfoundland, and One Lap of America. In 2011, I had the opportunity to

drive my Porsche 914-6 in the Targa Newfoundland, and by 2015 I figured that it was time for another adventure. I telephoned my best friend, Mike Danner.

"How about doing the One Lap in my Porsche 906 Turbo?" I proposed. After an imperceptible pause, he shot back: "Yes, but I have a better idea. Let's do it in my Carrera GT."

**THE ONE LAP OF AMERICA** started with the imagination of Brock Yates, the gonzo journalist at *Car and Driver* who first came to fame in the 1960s. In 1971, Yates organized the Cannonball Baker Sea-to-Shining-Sea Memorial Trophy Dash, a totally illicit cross-country speed contest to protest strict speed limits and celebrate the interstate highway system. In the late 1970s, Yates went on to create a sanitized version of the

Cannonball for public participation, and it became a sensation.

By the early 1980s, the Cannonball had run out of gas, and Yates was looking for a different format that still reflected his enthusiasm for fast driving in street-legal cars. In 1984, the first One Lap of America was a simple road rally that circumnavigated the country, but by 1992 Yates had juiced up the challenge by seizing on the template of the Tour de France. The classic French automotive event (it predates the bicycle race, by the way) traditionally combined controlled-speed rally stages on public roads with fast laps on different race tracks. One Lap of America continues to use this format, although the route is now shorter and more manageable.

Event preparations for Mike's supercar were hardly needed, as his



Porsche Carrera GT (chassis number 613) was overkill even for a demanding motorsports-style event like One Lap. The Carrera GT has the breeding of a race car, which you can see in the carbon-fiber chassis tub, carbon-composite brakes, six-speed manual gearbox, and a deep-breathing, 605-hp, 5.7-liter V10 that started out as an engine for the Footwork Arrows Formula 1 car. (Just thinking of the V10's sound at 8000 rpm is enough to make me giggle like a schoolgirl.)

Like a caged animal, Mike's Carrera GT had spent most of its life in a climate-controlled showroom. After all, it's not the most user-friendly of street cars. Just getting into and out of it is a bit of a challenge, and the fixed-position carbon-fiber bucket seats don't necessarily scream everyday comfort. This handicap was quickly fixed by an old pillow that cats had formerly slept on (and has since been immortalized as the "Katzenpillow").

The starting line of the 2015 One Lap of America was in Indiana at the corporate headquarters of Tire Rack, One Lap's long-time primary sponsor. It was a strange feeling to show up at a grassroots motorsports event in a hefty-dollar car built around an F1 engine. Even so, it did not take long for us to get acquainted with the other participants.

What a mixed bag they were, ranging from those of dubious European nobility to semi-professional drivers sporting their own support mechanics. There was a Swiss chocolatier complete with a giant French-style moustache who had participated in the One Lap a dozen times. Everyone we talked to not only admired the Carrera GT but also was amazed that we would take such a valuable machine on a notoriously gruesome long-distance road trip, where typically one-third of the cars either crash or drop out because of mechanical issues. Many of the participants actually thanked us for bringing the Carrera GT out of the showroom and driving it the way it



PHOTO: BRIAN HANZLIK

was meant to be driven.

While we were often reminded of the loss in value that would result from several thousand additional miles on the odometer, I reasoned that as the only Carrera GT to ever compete in the One Lap, the car would actually gather provenance. At any rate, it became more valuable for us at least.

**ONCE THE WEEK-LONG** event began, the days quickly blended into one another. After a turbulent test on a wet skid pad at Tire Rack, where the car's cornering grip was measured, the traveling road show of 70 cars migrated 560 miles to Mid-America

Motorplex, just outside of Council Bluffs, Iowa. On the 2.5-mile road circuit, I managed to spin the car on the second lap between turns 9 and 10, two low-speed corners of which the second turn is cunningly tighter than the first. I overshot and then foolishly must have come off the throttle ever so slightly, which was enough to snap the car backwards. Hands slower than the car? You know the result. In any case, I was happy to stay on the pavement and keep the car in one piece.

From that point on, I promised myself to keep the speed within my own capabilities. Not so our competitors. For them, it was full throttle all

**Top:** Imagine getting into the Carrera GT, revving one of the best-sounding engines in the world, and howling down a long, straight stretch of road. **Above:** Even at Telluride's lofty altitude of 8,750 feet, the Carrera GT had plenty of push on winding mountain roads.



Next came a drive through Kansas and Missouri to Kentucky. We raced at the track of the National Corvette Museum just outside Bowling Green. It had every feature of a truly grand road circuit, including long straights, elevation changes, and corner combinations that could kill you. At an overall length of 3.2 miles, it was impossible to memorize the more than 21 turns.

By this point we were seriously sleep deprived, as every day had ended long after midnight. I realized how fried my brain had become when I could not remember my own zip code. Competitors were dropping out like flies, mostly because of technical failures, but there were several crashes, too. For the Carrera GT and her two lucky pilots, it was an unforgettable driving experience and adventure. In seven days (and mostly nights) we traveled 3,780 miles through twelve states and raced at ten tracks.

**THE MEMORY OF** that exhausting challenge couldn't keep Mike and me from entering the 2016 One Lap of America. Apparently, some people do not learn by experience. This time, we arrived at the starting line in a Porsche 918 Spyder. This Spyder is chassis number 611, a tribute to driver Stefan Belkof, who famously drove a Porsche 956 endurance-racing car at the Nürburgring Nord-schleife to a time of 6 minutes, 11 seconds in 1983—a record that stands to this day.

Our 918 Spyder had less than 1,000 miles on the odometer at the start, and we could look forward to a route of 2,700 miles, with successive track events at Pittsburgh International Race Complex in Pennsylvania, Palmer Motorsports Park in Massachusetts, Summit Point Motorsports Park in West Virginia, the track at the National Corvette Museum in Kentucky, Road America and Great Lakes Dragway in Wisconsin, and finally Autobahn Country Club in Illinois.

Torrential rain accompanied the



80-car road show for the first three days, yet it was racing as usual and there was no postponing or skipping of events, not even if rivers of flood-water ran across the track. The Spyder's carbon-fiber body became our space capsule for a week, as we lived out of its meager storage compartments. Each of us had his favorite driving style, and the car offered a mode for every mood. Mike liked driving in hybrid mode, letting the car manage its own power allocation from the 600-hp 4.6-liter V8, the 154-hp electric motor that powers the rear wheels, and the 127-hp electric motor that powers the front wheels. Personally, I like to manually shift the seven-speed, dual-clutch PDK transmission and hear the V-8

shriek at 8500 rpm.

One day, about halfway through the 2016 One Lap, we overheard a conversation among fellow competitors about our upcoming drive. "Do not speed in Virginia or you will go to jail!" said one young man. In addition to Virginia's notorious prohibition against radar detectors, it turns out that speeding 20 mph over the limit is an automatic ticket for reckless driving, and anything over 90 mph is cuffs and jail. Or so we were told. We heeded this advice—mostly. When you are driving a Porsche 918 Spyder next to the 911 GT3 of your friends Julio and John, it's awfully hard to resist.

The 918 Spyder was blindingly quick, and full-throttle acceleration

Those who have not partied too hard the night before show up at the traditional farewell shoot.

The 918 Spyder and the 914 share the same design philosophy of light weight and performance.



Even driving the 918 Spyder at 80% in race mode provided immeasurable thrills on track.



Below: Transit stages were both entertaining and dangerous. Admirers would attach themselves to the 918 Spyder like pilot fish, sometimes following the car for 100 miles. Below right: Gregor Tarjan, Julia Cantillo, and Mike Danner posing in front of Julia's GT3 RS.

made us feel as if we might black out from the g-force. The carbon-ceramic brakes were incredible and got better the hotter they became, but I also learned not to depend on them too much when they were cold—as I discovered while passing a BMW M3 on the first lap at one of the tracks.

Our modus operandi was to drive the 918 Spyder like we had driven the Carrera GT the previous year. We were spirited and set the electronics in the most permissive mode, but we did not want to risk the car by over-driving. Most participants respected this approach, but it was quite amusing to hear younger guys in cars with a fraction of the value of the 918 try to egg us on.

**REFLECTING ON OUR** two adventures in the One Lap of America, Mike and I realized that a “collector car” is now often seen purely as a finan-

cial investment—it’s hoarding, really. Cars like the Carrera GT and the 918 Spyder are rarely, if ever, seen on public roads. Too often, the owners of these machines imprison them in humidity-controlled garages. For Mike and me, part of the adventure was simply the opportunity to use the Carrera GT and 918 Spyder as cars, rather than as investments. Maybe it will be an example to others.

Make no mistake, our adventures in the 2015 and 2016 One Lap represented a financial risk, but we were willing to take it, as the definition of an adventure is an uncertain outcome. Porsche built the Carrera GT and the 918 Spyder for high-performance driving, which we willingly undertook. These Porsches made us feel very special, as there are not many people who have been able to enjoy piloting these amazing automobiles through torrential rain, hail,

and tornadoes, much less on road racing tracks, drag strips, and even the open highway.

In these two cross-country races, we met fascinating individuals, both among our fellow competitors and on the road along the way. And our racing went to a good cause, as tens of thousands of dollars were raised for One Lap’s designated charity, the Alzheimer’s Foundation of America.

Mike and I were a perfect team. We toured through a great country and lived its dreams. We did not consider the competitive aspect of the racing to be the most important part of the experience. We participated in these two events for several reasons: the pleasure of driving the Carrera GT and 918 Spyder, the sense of adventure, and the simple camaraderie. Most of all, after many days and nights together in extreme circumstances in such extreme cars, we are still friends. ☺

