

Six hours and four-tenths of a second—the inside story of the Porsche victory at Laguna Seca

WILD RIDE

BY BILL OURSLER
WITH PATRICK LONG

Laguna's six hour race was excruciatingly tight for the winning Flying Lizard duo of Patrick Long and Jörg Bergmeister with the Rahal Letterman team and the Corvettes both taking turns at the front before Long seized the hard fought victory.

“It was all you, buddy, it was all you,” was the cool down lap message for Patrick Long from Flying Lizard strategist Thomas Blam. The American Le Mans Series six-hour Laguna Seca event this past May had been a nail biter lasting the entirety of its full 3600 minutes. Moreover, it was the second time in seven months that Blam had been forced to endure such agony, acting as a coach and cheerleader for PCA's Patrick Long and his teammate Jörg Bergmeister as they dug out a seemingly impossible victory on the storied track overlooking the Pacific coastline.

It is no secret that the engineers at Weissach have

had to work hard to keep their rear-engined, 997-based 911 GT3 RSR competitive in what many believe is the most competitive racing class on the planet, outside, perhaps, of Formula One—the GT2 division of the ALMS. Here the focus is on the assembly line fraternity where Porsche and Ferrari have been joined by factory-backed teams from BMW and Corvette.

Last October Bergmeister won not only the race at Laguna but the championship after surviving a last lap, final turn confrontation with determined Corvette driver Jan Magnussen. That clash resulted in Magnussen crashing at the finish after trying unsuccessfully to squeeze the equally determined Bergmeister



RICH CHENET

Laguna has been a rewarding place for the Flying Lizard Team with Bergmeister taking the honors last October and Long following suit this past May—both following fierce duels with their rivals.



RICH CHENET



Joey Hand's BMW couldn't have been closer to the Lizard GT3 as the race wound down, with only feet separating the two race cars at the checkered flag.

into the concrete barrier just yards from the checkered flag.

The 2009 championship had come hard for Bergmeister and Long, the two fighting back from the adversity of a fourth place at Sebring, before finding success in the middle part of the season and then falling back into the clutches of their rivals because of

circumstances beyond their control. In the end it all came down to the Laguna finale.

This year Laguna was in the middle of the schedule, not the end, and it went for six, not four hours. Now with the ALMS returning to action following its break for Le Mans, Long and Bergmeister can celebrate their second triumph at Laguna in a season which may

be more difficult than ever.

Prior to 2009 the war in GT had been a straight fight between the Porsche GT3 RSR camp, led by Seth Neiman's Flying Lizard crew, and the ultra-quick mid-engined Ferrari 430GT of the Houston-based Risi team. Then, at the beginning of last season the Rahal Letterman BMW M3 squad joined the fray, with the Corvettes following later in the summer.

Suddenly the two had become four, and the newcomers, although still feeling their way as they sorted themselves out, were almost immediately competitive—a situation promising serious problems for the Lizards in 2010. And problems there have been, including another difficult fourth place finish for Bergmeister and Long at Sebring after losing time in the pits to repair damage from being hit by the errant wheel of a fellow Porsche competitor.

Again though, as in 2009, the two bounced back with a victory in the second race of the season, leading the GT2 field home at Long Beach. But Long Beach was a short, less than two-hour affair where passing was extremely difficult, so once by your opposition, the chances were good that you would stay in front, as was the case for the Lizard twosome following a late pass for the lead by Long. Laguna would be far different.

There, while the hilly twisty mountain top circuit

presented its own challenges to moving up the leaderboard, passing was by no means impossible. With six hours of cut and thrust warfare between four different makes of cars of virtually equal performance, the contest on the Central California coast would come down to the team with the best strategy making the fewest mistakes. Put another way, Long, Bergmeister and Blam were about to spend six long hours at high speed inside a pressure cooker.

And that pressure cooker was not confined to the GT division, but embraced both the prototype and GT Challenge arenas as well. The prototype field may have been slim compared to that of their production-based cousins, but at Laguna there was a surprising amount of hard fought competition among the sports racing clan. Much of this was courtesy of the Muscle-milk Porsche RS Spyder with Klaus Graf, Sascha Maassen and Memo Gidley aboard.

Maassen and company held the lead over the favored Highcroft Acura before suffering electronic issues and dropping back. Nevertheless, in the end, Graf, Gidley and Maassen came back to take a well deserved second behind the Highcroft entry. Meanwhile, in the GT Challenge category Sebastiaan and Jeroen Bleekemolen, along with Tim Pappas took the top honors in the all Porsche GT3 division over Andy



As usual, the GT Challenge category was a Porsche fratricidal war that saw Sebastiaan and Jeroen Bleekemolen with Tim Pappas come out on top.



RICH CHENET

Although many have dismissed the Greg Pickett owned RS Spyder team, Sascha Maassen, Klaus Graf and Memo Gidley have been effective this season with the team claiming the LMP2 win at Sebring and finishing second overall at Laguna.



Porsche Cars North America CEO Detlev von Platen (left) chats with a PCA member in the Porscheplatz at Laguna as PCA Treasurer Ruben Ledesma looks on.

Lally, Henri Richard and Rene Villeneuve.

Still, despite the excitement provided by the prototypes and the new GTC class, most of the day's attention was fully riveted on the extraordinary GT contest which began with Bergmeister and Long mired down in the eighth starting slot behind the BMWs, Corvettes and Ferraris. The statistics, however, were a bit misleading since just a half a second, or an eye blink, separated their Lizard from the pole.

At the start it appeared to be a Ferrari afternoon with the 430GTCs out front as the Rahal Letterman BMWs and the Corvettes held up their end in close attendance, Bergmeister (who took the first

stint) and Long just a bit further back. However as the first hours ticked away, so to did the Ferraris, the 430 GTCs fading from the picture while the BMWs and Corvettes hounded each other at the front. Meanwhile, Long and Bergmeister were quietly, but steadily improving their position.

By late afternoon Bergmeister had pushed his way to second before handing over to Long, who not only kept the silver and red GT3 RSR in contention, but took it into the lead as the sun began to set. Even so, with just a little over an hour left, Long was being seriously pressed by Joey Hand whose BMW M3 clearly was giving nothing away to the Porsche. It was at this point that things changed for the worse.

With just 35 minutes remaining, Blam called Long in for the splash of fuel he needed to get to the end. Even if the stop had gone perfectly, it was a fifty-fifty proposition about whether or not he could have kept the lead. But it didn't go perfectly, the disconnection of the refueling hose taking an extra few seconds to accomplish, just enough time for Hand to take over first.

For Blam there was barely enough time to contemplate what might have been before Guy Smith in the Dyson Racing Lola-Mazda stopped beside the track, bringing out a full course yellow and bunching the field, including Hand and Long, into a tightly knit,

adrenaline-galvanized pack. After just five minutes, the pace car pulled in sending the field back to full speed, with Long pushing Hand as hard as Hand had pushed him earlier. Despite those efforts, the BMW driver hung on to the top spot, apparently headed for the victory.

Then, just three minutes later, in what was a touch of unwanted irony for the Rahal Letterman camp, Hand's teammate, Tommy Milner, Jr., came to a stop off course bringing out the yellow again, and once more bunching the field. Three minutes after that, with the Milner car now in a safe position and only 12 minutes remaining in the race, the green came back out.

This time Long was ready, diving down the inside of Hand on the restart to again take the GT lead. With no margin for error the contest continued as Hand stayed inches from Long's rear bumper while Oliver Gavin's third place Corvette was just a couple of feet further behind. With Blam encouraging Long as a trainer might do in the closing rounds of a professional championship boxing match, the tension rose to almost unbearable heights.

At this point we'll go inside the Porsche's cockpit and let Patrick Long, who says it was a victory like no other in his career, tell the story from his viewpoint.

“When the final yellow flag came out with about 15 minutes to go, the strategy of the race, from a driver’s perspective, completely changed...”

Talking about it afterwards almost created more anxiety than I actually felt when I was behind the wheel. When I went back through it, it was one of those races where you don’t process much cognitively. You’re working it from another level in your brain. You’re basically driving by feel; you’re just immersed in focus. The main point of drama had Ollie Gavin in front of me in the Corvette and Joey Hand’s BMW behind me. Joey wanted a way through, Ollie was holding me up because his soft tires were going off, but no one was going to give an inch because we didn’t know how this race was going to unfold. It had been so wild to that point with yellows and incidents and tire wear, we knew that we all had to drive our hardest and just let the race unfold.

Fast forward to the final stops. The Corvette had dived in early for new tires after their softs had faded. We were on mediums and contemplating running the entire stint on one set of tires with a green flag stop—and that’s what we ended up doing. We had a little hang up in the pit stop with the radio malfunction, so we ended up over-fueling the car and lost the lead on the green to the BMW who had stopped before us and taken fuel only. It then became a knock-down-drag-out.....Joey was up the road a few seconds, Ollie was now behind me a few seconds, so the order had swapped but I was still the meat in the sandwich. We didn’t have pace to pull that gap back to Joey, but the way that we were catching traffic—with traffic management being so critical at Laguna Seca these last few years—I knew that we were still in with a chance and I was pretty calm at that point.

When the final yellow flag came out with about 15 minutes to go, the strategy of the race, from a driver’s perspective, completely changed. The sun had set, the temperatures had dropped, the tires were over an hour and a half old where normally we run them just to about an hour, and I knew we had a chance. That’s when I asked Thomas Blam, “Where are these

other two guys in points?” He came back on the radio, “Just try to go for the win, but don’t take any risks.” This was a classic, all-bases-covered Flying Lizards answer, but that was actually correct and that’s what I wanted to hear.

At that point I was as concerned with holding onto second as I was with going for the lead, but that’s what I was processing in my mind. As soon as we came around for the restart, I was driving more from the heart and I saw an opening. There was no contemplating or processing championships or risk management....I was completely relying on my skill set as a driver and going for it. The line between hero and zero, brave and stupid, is so fine but there’s no time for any wavering. We were three-wide through Turn 11, which is difficult to get two cars through normally. Being on the inside I had the least amount of momentum, but there was a bit of door-to-door contact between all three of us with a GTC car on the outside, Joey in the middle and myself on the inside. Then I knew for sure that I had opened up a can of worms. The race had been so extreme and so touch-and-go in terms of contact. There was nothing dirty out there the whole six hours, but there was definitely some real elbow-to-elbow racing. When that restart happened, all bets were off.



So I got through on the inside of Turn 11 and I knew that I had to make my way through the traffic, whether it was a P1 car or a GTC car, as quickly as possible on cold tires to gap myself to the Corvette, which had new tires, and Joey, who was probably pretty unhappy at that point. There were about three laps to go when we broke through the traffic. I had two Ferraris ahead of me and it was absolutely just about hitting my marks.

My mindset in the past, even as recently as last year, was to drive as hard as I could, take chances, and once past the traffic to go as fast as possible. This race was groundbreaking for me because I had a different approach. It was now about hitting my marks, not looking in the mirror and not thinking about whether we’re going to win this race...just nailing it with clean, clean lines and perfect laps. He was up to my bumper as we crossed the finish line. If the race had gone one lap longer, I don’t know what the outcome would have been. One of those options might have been gravel traps and a white car and a red car sitting there wondering what might have been.

But in the end, this healthy rivalry between all four manufacturers is only going to grow through the season and, just like Long Beach, my outlook has been that every time we have even a sniff of a chance

at victory, we have to take it because it’s going to be that tough all year. It’s not just for the points; for me there is nothing that comes close to winning races. The points will figure themselves out as long as we race every weekend for wins and we don’t take stupid, unneeded risks.

I don’t know if I’ve ever had as much emotion after a race in my career but certainly not in the last eight years. Maybe there was something like it back in 2005 when we first triumphed over Alex Job at Road America, but not Le Mans, not Daytona....being in at the end and having such a wild finish. I can tell you my pass on Ollie at Turn 6 had me as excited as winning the race. I don’t think they showed that on TV but it was incredible when Ollie and I went door-to-door down the corkscrew and I was four wheels off the track trying to keep Joey behind me. It was just such a race.....I’ve never had anything like it in my career. The emotion was very different. I don’t know if the Lizards have found the dented roof yet, but I was literally standing on top of the car I was so happy. It was absolutely breathtaking and I’m still riding that high. 🍀

Follow Patrick Long and the rest of the ALMS season on his blog at PANORAMA on the Web at www.pca.org.