

FIRST OVERALL

Racing is all about winning, being first, the best over your opponent. For a car company, especially a new one like Porsche in 1952, winning cars on the track would lead to confidence in the showroom and increased sales. Win on Sunday sell on Monday.

This was nothing new for Ferdinand Porsche who headed Daimler Benz, then Auto Union Grand Prix racing in the 1930's. But after The War, Porsche was on his own, starting almost from scratch, under his own name, at a sawmill in Gmund Austria. The cars were small and used low power, modified Volkswagen engines, transaxles, and suspension. But they were light and well constructed. As the inventor of the Volkswagen, Porsche and his staff knew how to get the most out of his economy-car components. The result was that they had won a good many class races in the 1100, 1300, and 1500 cc categories, but what chance would they have for an overall win?

Suddenly, in early 1952 the planets aligned. The road race to be run through the streets of Brynfan Tyddyn, PA in conjunction with the Devil's Despair Hill Climb – established in 1906 and still run today – was reduced to 1950 cc cars for safety reasons. Porsche saw their chance. They had recently developed the new, type 540, light-weight Aluminum Competition Roadster, which has come to be known as the America Roadster.

Feeling that they could score an overall victory, Porsche built an even more special version of the Roadster for this event. The first of the 16 Aluminum Roadsters had not been particularly successful with its standard 1500 cc type 527 engine, so chassis 10465 was built with thinner aluminum (1 mm, same as steel bodied cars), big 11 inch aluminum brake drums, and the secret weapon the first Super spec engine – the 1500 Super type 528 with higher compression, racing cam, bigger carburetors and manifolds, and roller bearing crankshaft. The car was built and shipped to Max Hoffman on 5 May 1952.

But you also need a winning driver. To this end, according to Phil Walters (the driver), Porsche invited Briggs Cunningham and his star driver (Walters) to the Porsche estate in June following the 1952 Le Mans race. No doubt after the appropriate amount of 'Jagerschnitzel und bier,' Cunningham agreed to run the car. Interviewed in 1978, Mr. Cunningham didn't remember whether he actually purchased the car or just had it on "loan" from "Maxie." At any rate, Cunningham was America's sportsman of the day and had, arguably, America's best driver in Phil Walters. All the elements for success were in place and the Porsche marque scored its **first overall victory**. Road and Track, Nov 1952, pictured it as "Phil Walters, driving Briggs Cunningham's very rapid Porsche, came up from a very bad starting position to garner the **outright win**."

10465 was raced by Briggs Cunningham and his son a few more times at Thompson, CT and the 1952 Watkins Glen Grand Prix before being returned to Max Hoffman. John Bentley, editor of Auto Age magazine was excited to buy the car in the spring of 1953 and wrote a four page article for the magazine, even featuring it on the cover after repainting it in the yellow and green color scheme – the headlight diamonds no doubt copied from the Mercedes 300SL race cars of the time. Richard von Frankenberg, in the March 1960

Christophorus, said the Roadster could be pared down to 1330 lbs in race trim, a little less than Bentley's finding. But Bentley claimed it had "75 bhp at the rear wheels . . . and will climb up the back of a modified Jaguar XK120 up to 70 mph, and easily out-drag a Cadillac from zero to any speed." Bentley raced the car extensively, followed by a dozen other owners on the east coast, until it was abandoned in the early 1960's, not having the newly required seatbelts and roll bar, and just plain no longer competitive.

All cars, especially race cars, were advancing rapidly in the mid-1950's and the Roadsters were quickly eclipsed. So, Porsche moved in two directions, the full competition type 550 Spyder with an aluminum body, tube frame and four-cam, mid-engine configuration. And, continuing to use the type 540 designation the Speedster, based on the final, steel-bodied Roadster. The now-named America Roadster had done its job – won a very important victory for the fledgling Porsche company, and spawned two new product lines. Porsche was now not only a manufacturer of small, luxury sporting cars, but a producer of serious club and professional racers.

10465's current owner, Ron Roland, purchased the car in Sep 1975 from friend and fellow Porsche restorer/racer Vic Skirmants. Ron admits that, although he knew of the car when Vic bought it a year earlier from Dr. John Sullivan (who offered it as a parts car to Roadster no. 12345, now owned by Chuck Stoddard), he really didn't know what an America Roadster was, much less seen one. So Vic drove it over and they took it out on a chilly Fall afternoon. By sheer luck Ron was able to buy the car a year later, even though he was buying a new house, when Vic sold it to fund his racing team.

Restoration of the car follows the familiar story line. Race wear and tear by many drivers, weather damage over the years, lost parts, neglect, abandonment. The amazing thing is the car still ran well when discovered. The floor pan and battery box were still usable, although longitudinals and the bottom of the tunnel were gone. It was decided to retain and refinish as much of the original car as possible for historical documentation. For example, there is no evidence that the car had either seat belts or a roll bar, despite its long racing history – only the original floors show that. And the doors had no provision for side curtains, which a race car would not need. Later side windows were fashioned from Plexiglas and steel bars bolted to the inner door panels – only the original door upholstery shows that. The seats are apparently unique to this car, "Because the first Roadster's seats were primitive, the no. 2 Roadster was fitted with the deluxe "import seats" removed from (Erwin) Komenda's personal VW. AR No. 3 was fitted with Komenda's new design, the "Le Mans seat." (Porsche Speedster Typ 540, pg. 31) – only the original seat covers verify the period photos. Bumpers were discarded when the car was new, even though they were on the car at its first victory. The unique rear wheels, ¼ inch wider at 3½ inches than the original 3¼ x 16 wheels, were fabricated from VW Bus wheels, drilled for venting and re-offset.

The biggest restoration problem was the thin, fragile aluminum, which had many dents, tears, and some corrosion – after all, it had been nick-named "The Reynolds Wrap Special," since all the paint had been removed. The car was sent to a local aluminum body expert with explicit instructions – just weld up the cracks; don't cut any panels off the car!! A couple months later the call came that they couldn't weld the old cruddy aluminum so they

had cut the rocker panels off and were fabricating new ones, as well as other major pieces, out of metal that was twice as thick and tempered. The car was rescued, again. “I learned to weld aluminum by welding the old, cruddy rocker panels back together, piece by piece, and welding them back onto the car, along with the other pieces from the front fenders and trunk lid,” Ron said. “The car now retains about 95 % of its original aluminum and about 75% of its original steel. I lost count of how many times the metal had to be annealed and re-annealed during the metal finishing process.” The aluminum was then chemically prepared, dried, and sprayed with Dupont Corlar epoxy primer, and yes, there is a bit of “synthetic” filler on top of that – full disclosure for all the experts out there with their body magnets. Additionally, there are no holes in the body for Gläser badges and there is no sign the car was ever undercoated.

The final color was a quandary, since race cars are painted and repainted many times in their career. It was finally decided to respray under the trunk lid, engine lid and inside the doors with the original light radium green color that still remained, then mask that off and spray the yellow as would have been done in 1953, although to a concours, not car lot, standard. Probably doesn't matter since some concours judges will not accept that historical aspect. The original radium green on the gas tank remains a mystery.

Mechanically, the car retains its original 1500 Super engine which has certainly been rebuilt many times, and its VW “crash box,” a fully NON synchromesh transmission so double clutching is a must (no PDK here). Other interesting ‘firsts’ include self-cancelling turn signals (with lever on the right), and vinyl/plastic covered wiring (although black, yellow, and green are the only colors used).

Now assigned to the annals of history, the Typ 540 Aluminum/Sport/Competition/America Roadster was one of the quickest, fastest, best handling and braking cars of its day. As a race car it was originally expensive and exclusive, but when reimagined as the Speedster it became the GT3 of the 1950s, while its sibling 550 Spyder became the giant-killer, both models forming the foundation for Porsche's racing and marketplace dominance today.