Hans Stuck at the wheel on the way to winning Sebring in 1986. His co-drivers were Jo Gartner and Bob Akin. (Porsche 962 chassis #962-113)

The 2.6-litre Porsche 956 which raced in the 1982/1983 seasons in Europe, was not accepted for racing in the USA, and so the 962 was developed by the factory. The sticking point was that the pedal box of the 956 sat just ahead of the front axle centre line, and so
Porsche was forced to move the front axle forward by 4¾ in/120mm. The 962 was also not permitted to run twin turbochargers, and so the 2.85-litre engine with a single turbo was fitted. The 962’s first race in the USA was therefore the Daytona 24 Hours on 4/5 February 1984. (Editor)

Bob Akin had been one of the first Porsche customers in the USA to get the 962. He got chassis #102 in May of 1984, and raced in IMSA in 1984 and 1985 with a variety of co-drivers, such as John O’Steen and Jim Mullen in 1985. He had various good finishes, but no victories. Chassis #102 was damaged in a crash and ultimately replaced with chassis #113 in 1985. In early 1985, after Daytona, he moved his team from Atlanta where it was run by John Eversley, to his home town of Ossining NY. John was not moving, so Bob was forced to find another team manager and picked John Bright. John Bright was an Englishman, who had been working at Lola Cars in England where he had been the chief mechanic for Brian Redman on the Lola T600 in 1981. He had also spent time constructing cars at Lola, specifically building monocoques, so he was an excellent guy to have running a team. He was also an excellent driver in his own right, having finished second to Nelson Piquet in the British F3 championship in the late ’70s.
Jerry Woods and I started the 1985 season at Daytona running a one-off project with 935-84 as part of the Akin team for Jim Mullen. After Sebring John (Bright) asked us to come and work for him as fly-in crew members for the IMSA schedule in 1985, which we were happy to do.
As the 1986 season started, there were new developments with the team. We had switched to Yokohama tyres, and Jo Gartner had been hired as the driver for the IMSA schedule that year. Hans Stuck would also join for the longer races as his schedule with the factory Rothman’s cars allowed. 1986 had started reasonably well, although we were out early at Daytona due to an accident in the chicane. Miami, resulted in a fine third place and we won the pit stop contest. This was after a bad crash in practice due to sand and oil on the track, and we had to work all night to repair the tub, but luckily John was there to guide this effort. Hans Stuck had said, “Well that’s it, I will change my flight and go home.” John Bright told him, “No, you come back tomorrow, this car will race. It will be better than a factory car!” Stuck and Gartner came back the next morning and were impressed to see the car on the ground and ready to go. “Very good job boys,” Hans said.
Next up was Sebring, and after Miami, we were feeling good about things. The 12 Hours of Sebring in 1986 was a very different place than it is today as the circuit was longer, very bumpy, and very dark at night. Lighting was poor around the circuit at night, and in fact it was non-existent in most places. The circuit length was 4.86 miles, reduced from the original 5.2 miles in 1984. Practice went reasonably well, and the car was fast. At one point, however, Stuck came in unexpectedly, opened the door and said, “I have a problem.”

“What’s that Hans,” John asked at which point Stuck handed him the gear shift lever which had broken off from the linkage, so a minor repair was needed. Stuck was (and still is) a funny guy. He called John, ‘Johnnie boy’. He would always come and check the car before he drove, and then stand on the front nose to make sure the bodywork was strong. Then he said, “Johnnie boy, did you check the suspension after Miami?” John replied in the
affirmative to which Stuck responded, “Ah good, because you know, if this front upright breaks in turn 1, that’s it, I see you in hell. And you know me, I don’t care, but maybe Bob (Akin) is driving, so you better check it very carefully!”

The #5 Porsche 962 of Hans Stuck, Jo Gartner and Bob Akin at speed during the 12 Hours of Sebring, 1986

The competition level was high. There were 962s from Akin, Holbert, Bruce Leven, two from Jim Busby, Preston Henn, several other prototypes from Jaguar and BMW. In total 88 cars were entered, and 76 started the race. So, car preparation and driving skill in getting through traffic would be key.
The #14 Porsche 962 driven by Al Holbert, Derek Bell and Al Unser Jr. finished third overall in the 12 Hours of Sebring in 1986.

Hans Stuck and Jo Gartner were the best of friends and always clowning around. Stuck was always looking to play practical jokes on people, but especially on Jo. At one point, after practice was over for the day, he feigned illness and told Jo, you stay and review the gear charts, I am going back to the hotel, I don’t feel too well. He of course felt fine, got back to the hotel and somehow talked the hotel manager into giving him Jo’s room key. This was the Sebring Holiday Inn, a sprawling one story hotel, with room doors directly onto the parking lot. Stuck took everything out of Jo’s room and set it up in the parking lot. The bed, the TV, chairs, tables, the rack with all of Jo’s clothing, his toiletries kit – everything. He then drove back to the circuit, and said, “Ah, I feel better now, I took some medicine.” He told all the mechanics what he had done, but of course Jo was in the dark. After some time, Hans says to Jo, “Okay, let’s go back to the hotel and get some dinner.” They pulled up near Jo’s room,
and he of course remarks, “Hmm, what is all this stuff doing out in the parking lot.” Then as they pull up, Jo says, “Hey this is my stuff, what the hell is going on here?” Jo opened the door to his room and found it completely stripped, it was all out in the parking lot, but by that stage Hans was rolling on the floor laughing.

We had qualified fourth, so the car had the speed. The race got underway, and we went around and around without issue, while others had their problems as the circuit was as rough as ever. The BMW prototypes had all kinds of problems, one caught on fire and did not even start. The Group 44 Jaguars also had issues and dropped out. Holbert’s car had some kind of issue and had a long pit stop, as did Busby’s cars, and the Henn and Bayside cars also dropped out with engine problems.
Darin Brassfield, John Morton and Jim Busby finished a fine second overall in the #67 BFG Porsche 962 in the 12 Hours of Sebring on 22 March 1986

At about dusk we already had a large lead of some number of laps. Hans Stuck came out of the last corner, and said on the radio, “I have a flat tyre, I’m coming in” (the pit entrance was right at the exit of the last corner). Meanwhile, we saw a tyre and wheel bounding down the pit straight, it came over the pit wall and hit a guy standing at the wall signalling. It turned out that he was one of Jim Downing’s crew, and unfortunately he was seriously hurt. Meanwhile we were waiting in the pit, and Stuck was screaming, “Flat tyre, flat tyre!” John looked at the car and said, “No, Hans, not a flat tyre. You have NO tyre or wheel on the right front.” Stuck just said, “Well, put on another one and I will continue.” We checked everything, and it all looked good, so we put on a new wheel and tyre, and he went on his way. We saw nothing really wrong that could have caused the wheel to come loose at that time. After he had done quite a few laps, we were happy that the wheel had been properly
fastened at the last stop. However, John decides that at all subsequent pit stops, we hammer the wheels with the guns, even if we are not changing tyres. In hindsight, what was probably happening was that the wheel centres were worn where they fitted onto the wheel pins on the hub. Under constant heavy breaking and the bumpy Sebring course, the nut had somehow worked its way loose. We were very lucky it happened just before the pits, and so he could come straight in.

The #5 Porsche 962 of Hans Stuck, Jo Gartner and Bob Akin during the 12 Hours of Sebring, 1986. Note the signs of wear and tear on the headlamp covers

The race continued and our lead was extended and towards the end, we decided that Jo would do the last stint and so with about 25 minutes to go, Jo took over. He duly took the chequered flag, we had won, but then on the cool down lap, the front wheel fell off again. He completed the cool down lap on three wheels and drove like that to victory lane! One of
the Busby BFG (BF Goodrich) cars was second, Holbert was third, and Bruce Jenner/Scott Pruett finished fourth overall in a Roush Mustang.

A late pit stop shot of the winning #5 Porsche 962 with Hans Stuck standing at the driver’s door. He was prepared to get in at the end, but Gartner said he was good to finish. The author is cleaning the windscreen.

In all the excitement after the race, Jo was pulled over by the Sebring Police on the way back to the hotel, for, you guessed it – speeding! The race ended around 11:00 pm as always, and the mechanics got back to the hotel around 2:00 am. Bob Akin, Hans Stuck and Jo Gartner were waiting in the lobby with pizza, beer, and of course Coke (there was not much else open in Sebring at 2:00 am)! It was one of the best pizza and beer dinners ever! Things did go better with Coke!
Jubilation for the winning crew and drivers. Front row (from left to right): John Bright (crew chief with glasses), Richard Brown, author, Brian Nott, Linc Smith, Jerry Woods (glasses) and Francis Dutton. Back row (from left to right): Bert Baldwin (from Yokohama in black jacket), Bob Akin, Hans Stuck and Jo Gartner. This is a photo taken of the 1986 Victory Lane Yokohama poster (reproduced with permission)

Written by: Martin Raffauf

Images: Porsche, Bill Martin, Bill Murenbeeld, Yokohama