

An Instant Classic

THE 55TH ANNUAL 12 HOURS OF SEBRING WAS TOUGH ON PORSCHE, BUT ONE 911 DRIVER'S BRILLIANT DISPLAY OF TALENT IN THE FINAL LAPS MADE IT A RACE TO REMEMBER

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Years from now, when bar-room racers review the events of 2007, one incandescent moment in the closing minutes of the 12 Hours of Sebring will stand above all the important but nonetheless smaller measures of a classic, watershed event in ALMS racing history. Although ultimately lasting but a fraction of a second, that moment displayed heart, passion, and the combined will to win of an entire team, when to all others the final results might have seemed a foregone conclusion.

For eleven hours, it was an all-out battle in the GT2 category for supremacy among a stellar field of 19 cars. Two prominent Porsche teams — Tafel Racing and Flying Lizard Motorsports — were arrayed against two equally strong Ferrari squads — Petersen Motorsports/White Lightning and Risi Competizione. But the uncertainties of racing winnowed the fight to just two cars in the final 30 minutes, one each from the two most storied sports-car makers of all time: Ferrari and Porsche.

In Risi's fast Italian was Brazilian Jaime Melo. In the Flying Lizard Porsche, factory driver Marc Lieb. By all accounts the F430 had the speed and a comfortable but tentative cushion of some 30 seconds over the new 997 GT3 RSR. So, barring some calamity, Risi's Ferrari was headed for the checker. Each team, however, required one final stop for fuel before the flag. What was done in terms of service for each in those critical seconds would determine the final outcome of an epic battle...

Battle Royale:
Ferrari and Porsche
in a straight fight
that boiled down to
0.2 seconds after
12 hours of racing!





After losing the 12 Hours of Sebring to a Panoz GT-LM by five seconds last year and just beating a Ferrari to take second, Flying Lizard Motorsports brought two of the factory's sparkling new 997 GT3 RSRs for 2007's race. The question was whether the Lizards' well-established expertise with Porsches could turn larger, more powerful but as yet untested replacements for last season's 996 RSRs into formidable weapons that could overcome the impressive speed of the now well-proven mid-engined Ferrari F430s.

The Porsche teams would have their work cut out for them. Ferrari's field was significantly increased from last year's tentative, single, Giuseppe Risi-backed entry at Sebring. An impressive five-car armada of Italian screamers from three different teams, each bent on crushing Porsche at the classic 12-hour, showed up in 2007. Risi brought two cars; his own #62 for Melo and Mika Salo, the ex-F1 driver from Finland, plus fast Brit' Johnny Mowlem. A second F430 went under the Risi tent for Texas oilman Tracey Krohn. That car, #61 — a garish, poison-green racer — was run under Krohn Racing's banner for Krohn, ALMS veteran Nic Jonsson, and Colin Braun, a fresh-faced Texas newcomer from the national karting wars.

Ferrari's biggest surprise came when White Lightning's lightning-bolt liveried F430s rolled out for early practice. After seeing this familiar, championship-winning livery on ALMS Porsches for so many seasons, it was a shock to see the same colors on two new Ferraris. Late last year, Mike Petersen and Dale White, who own and

run White Lightning, decided Porsche's rear-engined platform had finally reached its technical zenith after watching the continual improvement of Risi's F430 throughout the season. Even with the promise of the 997's 3.8-liter flat six, improved wheelbase-to-track ratio, stiffer chassis, and improved rubber, there was still, in their minds, a serious physical advantage in the mid-engined F430's layout.

It hadn't been an easy decision to jump ship and leave the comfort of years with Porsche. Crew chief Dennis Chizma and his team of savvy technicians had mastered the arcane secrets of extracting the last tenths from the Porsches to make them consistent winners. There was also Porsche Motorsport North America's engineering support and its big white trailer at every race, with its seemingly bottomless supply of special replacement parts.

Switching to the Italian marque meant the White Lightning team would have to master an entirely new engineering philosophy and work with a chassis that was far more production car than works-built racer. But perhaps the biggest loss in leaving Porsche was the availability of the factory's works drivers. White Lightning had won the GT2 Driver's Championship the previous season with ex-factory shoe Jörg Bergmeister and American werkes driver Patrick Long. Replacing the services of such topline drivers wouldn't be easy.

Into the void created by White Lightning's departure rode what might be the most interesting dark-horse ALMS entry for 2007: Tafel Racing. When Porsche Motorsport honchos Hartmut Kristen and

Uwe Brettel announced at Petit Le Mans last year that relatively unknown racer Jim Tafel had bought two of the first 997 GT3 RSRs in addition to two scheduled for the veteran Flying Lizards, there were a few puzzled looks in the paddock.

As soon as the name Tony Dowe was attached to Tafel's team, however, there was immediate respect. Dowe, a veteran English team manager and, Tafel, a young Floridian owner, had successfully worked together in the Grand-Am series in 2006 and had decided to move up, choosing the ALMS's GT2 series as the most difficult and challenging category for their debut. When Tafel's pristine white racers arrived directly from Weissach several weeks earlier, Dowe had already made arrangements with Tim Cindric of Penske Racing to place the all-new chassis on Penske's five-post shaker rig. Every bit of computerized wizardry available to the racing engineers at Weissach had been utilized to design the new 911s to counter the Italian threat, but winter weather had precluded extensive testing.

The 997's 3.8-liter engines had already been run for countless hours on the factory's dynamometers, using a virtual Sebring circuit program to ensure the latest engines would perform as flawlessly as previous flat sixes had, but the new car's handling characteristics were essentially unknown. For those not familiar with the purpose of a five-post shaker, imagine an ultra-sophisticated chassis dyno that tests suspension components in much the same manner that an engine dynamometer can run a computerized program that

simulates a racing circuit's unique characteristics. At this time, the factory only had two days of shaker-rig testing on the 997's chassis in Germany. When Dowe completed his tests at Penske's NASCAR facility, he had 20 days of accumulated data! He, in essence, already knew ten times as much as the factory about the 997's springs, shocks, and geometry settings — but hadn't yet turned a wheel!

In the first day of official testing for the 12-hour race, it wasn't too surprising that Patrick Long in Tafel Racing's #71 Porsche was the fastest 911. With a time of 2:03.7, Long was still half a second off Mowlem's fast time in the Risi F430, but his performance indicated Dowe's ministrations on behalf of the 997 chassis had not gone for nothing — and that the Flying Lizards were going to have some serious German competition to go with the Italian threat.

The next practice sessions, in slower, warmer conditions, didn't see big improvements in times for either of the top two Porsche teams, but Tomas Enge, a team driver on last year's Aston-Martin Prodrive team, set a new benchmark with White

Lightning's F430 at a record 2:02.6. Jaime Melo, in Risi's F430, went 2:02.9. Dominik Farnbacher, in the second Tafel racer, surprised all with a sizzling 2:02.9 just a couple of thousandths off Melo's best.

In qualifying, Melo set the pace in #62 with a fast time of 2:02.4, then spun his F430 trying to beat his own record. That failed effort flat-spotted his tires, requiring his removal to the rear of the grid for the start because of a rule requiring cars to start on the same tires used for qualifying. Fitting new rubber would negate his time. Enge, who had run 0.3-second slower for the second-fastest time, inherited the GT2 pole while the Lizards' Jörg Bergmeister sat alongside in the front row on a 2:03 flat. Both Tafel RSRs were lined up behind.

With 19 cars on the GT2 grid, this was the best field of Sebring endurance racers seen in decades — and it wasn't just Porsches and Ferraris. PTG's Tom Milner had taken over the Panoz team cars from Multimatic when BMW bowed out of U.S. production-car racing, while the Spyker squadron was running its "new" C8 — last year's chassis plus suspension upgrades — with ex-Aston Martin pilot Peter Kox and Dutchman Jarek Janis.

The Panoz racers set the highest timed speeds in practice down the long back straight but lacked the cornering power of the F430s and 911s. And the Spyker? "It was handling very well, compared to

last year's car," opined Kox. "But the C8's Audi V8 simply lacked the speed to match the front runners." Bobby Rahal's single-car 997 GT3 RSR entry for Ralf Kelleners, Tom Milner Jr., and son Graham Rahal looked well prepared, but couldn't claim nearly the time invested in development by the Flying Lizards or Tafel.

At the start, it was unfortunate that pole-sitting Tomas Enge in the White Lightning F430 and Wolf Henzler in Tafel's #71 911 came together. The resulting damage would eventually send both possible winners behind the wall for time-consuming repairs. As a result, the surprisingly fast Dominik Farnbacher took advantage of the situation and assumed the lead after the first five minutes. He held it until a determined Jörg Bergmeister snatched point 18 minutes later. The first laps of heated competition also temporarily removed several top contenders — like Ralf Kelleners in the Rahal-Letterman Racing 997.

Jaime Melo, on fresh tires, was charging through the pack at a furious pace to regain his position at the front. It took him one hour to catch Bergmeister, who wasn't exactly hanging about. Melo passed the swift German just as the Lizards' RSR dived onto pit lane for its first stop, taking four tires, fuel, and a new driver — team principal Johannes van Overbeek. Melo, running on fumes, pitted just one lap later but took on fuel only, staying in the car to

FLM's #45 started out as a pristine 911 but wouldn't stay that way (1) despite the best efforts of Jörg Bergmeister (2). Tafel's #71 (3) had the pole but was taken out of contention at the start. New Rahal-Letterman RSR suffered early damage, too (4)...

